

DISTORTED REFLECTIONS: A HANDFUL OF STORIES

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ABSTRACT

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Distorted Reflections is a collection of short stories meant to be “entertainments” as defined by Graham Greene, stories whose primary purpose is to whisk you away to a different world, to bring raw pleasure that hopefully spices up your life a bit. The title comes from the fact that much of the scenery and characters in these stories are etched from my own life experiences. But these stories are not loosely autobiographical. Instead, they take readers in dramatic and dark directions by using graphic violence, profanity, and an overall sense of grit and oppressiveness I hope coats the page through my words. My hope is these stories maintain a realistic tone while having their characters go through harrowing and somewhat unrealistic events, a dichotomy I feel can grasp the readers attention.

The stories are set in varying locations, ranging from the wintry chill of Iceland to the thick swamp air of Louisiana, but all of them feature a common thread in that they feature good, inherently relatable characters whose bad decisions lead to domino effects that derail their lives. I hope that the words to follow spark a little bit of joy in your lives, and you come away from these stories feeling a little bit excited and thrilled, and a little more pessimistic about the state of society!

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Introduction

When I first put pen to paper (or, rather, fingers to keyboard) to begin this collection of stories, I was conflicted. I was torn in two regarding what I wanted to write about, what worlds I wanted to explore with my words. Do I create a fantastical world like in the fantasy novels I grew up reading, stuffed to the brim with lore and history? Should I write a gritty, hyper-realistic story, addressing the concerns of the day, with sociopolitical overtones? Or should I do something in between these two extremes? Ultimately, I decided to draw heavily from my own life to craft these stories, trying to paint vivid imagery, thrusting my characters into situations that are violent, chaotic and troubling. These stories reflect my reality in that they feature characters and people who are sketches of those who I have met in real life, and certain situations are semi-autobiographical. They are a fictionalized, alternative version of past events, where things go horribly wrong for everyone involved. Hence the title *Distorted Reflections*.

The first story in this bundling together of three stories, is “Jaguar God.” The scenery and atmosphere in this story draws heavily from the summer of 2017, when I studied abroad in Costa Rica. I ultimately became so enchanted with the country that I returned to Central America as a backpacker, making my way from Guatemala to Panama, a naïve young man trying to open his eyes to the world. I hoped to have an authentic experience mingling with the locals and immersing myself in the culture of this region, but I grew increasingly disenchanted, and came to the realization of the inauthenticity of my experience as a relatively wealthy American tourist using someone else’s country as my playground. “Jaguar God” explores this slow process of disillusionment through the eyes of Alejandro, a college dropout and perpetual disappointment to his parents, who travels to Guatemala in search of (as Kendrick Lamar put it in his song “The Recipe”), “women, weed, and weather.” While staying in a dingy hostel, he meets lanky German boy Jonathan, who has the same ideals as Alejandro. The two form a friendship and spend their

nights (and days) lusting after women and drinking. Soon, they get bored of this hedonistic lifestyle, and seek out an adventure that can make them stand out from the crowd, adventure they can wow people with by posting to Instagram. They meet Carlos, a man belonging to a local indigenous tribe, and set out on a hunt for a man-eating jaguar. Things, predictably, go horribly wrong.

With this story, I wanted to explore the ennui I feel plagues a lot of people today, and weave a tale demonstrating the extreme lengths people will go to in order to alleviate that ennui. I think that with the advent of modern technology, people are becoming more and more dulled to the joy of everyday experiences. Before, you had to walk or drive to the corner store to get milk and eggs, now you can get them with the touch of a button on your phone. I think this deprivation of human interaction, and the ease with which we can do things has sped up the pace of life and made it difficult to live in the moment, and I try to explore the root of this boredom through my work. As the story of “Jaguar God” takes dark twists, Alejandro quickly finds himself out of his depth and wishing that he could escape back to his comfortable first-world reality. The story is not hyper-realistic, and features elements of mysticism, though the descriptions in the story themselves are very earthy and real. Though not explicitly stated “Jaguar God” is set in a near future where the big cat has gone extinct, and is sort of a parable regarding the destruction of the environment and the path we are heading down as humans.

This story, of course, has parallels to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, one of my favorite canonical works of literature. Both stories involve a journey upriver into the heart of the dense jungle, depicted in contrast with the ways of “civilized” Westerners. Both stories also have a central figure that has gone rogue and must be killed, though in my story that central figure is an animal, not a human. Although, I attempt to address questions different from the ones Conrad explored in his work. Conrad tried to point out that the relatively primitive natives are really no worse than the proper Europeans attempting to bring them civilization, but my story is more about

the quest for excitement and adventure today's tourists attempt to undergo within these countries, and the clashing of Western values with tradition. "Jaguar God" is a dirty and grimy story, and through my language I try to convey the sensations, the heat and the wetness that pound backpackers as they travel through Central America. As Conrad drew from his experiences working for a Belgian trading company operating in the Congo, so I draw from my experiences as a backpacker in a semi-autobiographical manner.

The second story in my collection, "Brothers," is similar to "Jaguar God" in that it is a story of friendship put to the test. Set in Iceland, with details drawn from my experience traveling through the country, "Brothers" is a thriller of sorts whose characters are very relatable to students at my *alma mater*, the University of Texas at Austin. "Brothers" follows Kieran and Mac, two fraternity members from New Mexico, who travel to Iceland to party and have a good time abroad, much like Alejandro and Jonathan from my first story. However, this story features a good deal more humor, at least in the first half, as Kieran and Mac make humorous observations about themselves and the Scandinavian women surrounding them. Kieran and Mac have an intense rapport, cracking jokes and poking fun at each other. They have an inflated sense of self-worth stemming from being big fish in a small pond back in their American small town. A lot of the story's black comedy arises from a fish-out-of-water situation, these two buffoon Americans trying to navigate a Scandinavian culture so much different from theirs, trying and failing to apply what worked for them in the United States. The first half of the story is a reprieve of sorts from the grit of "Jaguar God." But, I'm not one to write happy stories, and things shift in a dark direction by the end of this tale. The moral of this story is that everyone has secrets, and we are nothing without our secrets. When our secrets collapse, then our world collapses as well.

My goal was to write "Brothers" as a very cinematic tale. The first half of the story is based on observations from my time in the small, frozen island nation of Iceland, and I try to deliver my

own awkward experiences as a fish-out-of-water American. Tonally, the story's first half is quite inspired by the book *101 Reykjavik* by Hallgrímur Helgason (and the associated movie). Both stories are set in Reykjavik, and though *101 Reykjavik* features a native Icelandic as its central character, in both stories you have people living in relative isolation from others, doing things in their own fantasy worlds, aimlessly wandering the city with no real direction in life. The characters in my story are empty, looking for distractions, and they find them in the smoky bars and clubs of the city. Kieran and Mac are just hedonistic drifters looking for a good time, with cavalier attitudes toward others. I sketched these two from my experience with fraternity members at UT Austin, and try to use them to create a depiction of oft-criticized traditional masculinity. I try to use the casual misogyny of these characters as a contrast to the much more egalitarian cultural disposition of Iceland. I use a perspective shift to build tension and lead to a dramatic tonal shift I hope shocks the reader. The second half is much more kinetic and frenzied, keeping the reader on his or her toes.

This collection concludes with “Whispers,” a story very different from the first two tonally. “Whispers” does not feature the dripping masculinity and the male perspective of the first two stories. It also does not feature the violence characterizing the first two stories. Rather, it is told from the perspective of a teenage girl, Sarah, and siphons details from my own experience growing up, going to a wealthy, religiously affiliated private school. “Whispers” is a fragment of a bildungsroman, a snippet of a coming-of-age story concerning a young girl grappling with family troubles and trying to find meaning in her life. There is also a parallel narrative concerning the spread of rumors, and the damaging effect they can have on relationships.

Sarah has a solidly middle-class upbringing, but her parents have scrounged up the money to send her to an elite private school in the hopes of better preparing her for the future. But Sarah isn't particularly concerned about her education, the only two things in her life that matter being

the sport of basketball and her friendship with Nell. Sarah also has to deal with her brother, who is extremely sick, and grapple with the fact she may lose him soon. Sarah is filled with a weird mixture of emotions regarding her brother. She feels pride in being the older sister and a guide to him, but she also feels resentment that her brother is the “favorite” of the family, a situation compounded by the attention he receives due to his illness. “Whispers” is also the tale of Mr. Henry, a distinguished English teacher at the school who becomes an unlikely mentor for the petulant Sarah. Mr. Henry is a brilliant man and an accomplished writer and educator, but he is also dogged by rumors about his sexuality and accusations of pedophilia at his previous school. The relationship between Mr. Henry and Sarah is a complex and difficult-to-pinpoint one that evolves through the course of the story.

I have drawn from a lot of literary and media influences in crafting “Whispers,” unlike the other stories in this collection, which are more monolithic in their influences. Curtis Sittenfeld’s debut novel *Prep* was a huge inspiration. *Prep* concerns Lee Fiora, a lower-middle-class girl from Indiana who is sent to an elite prep school in the Northeast. *Prep* deals with an adolescent girl awkwardly navigating an environment she is not comfortable in, just like my story. Sittenfeld is a master at crafting intricate details that feel real, and I have tried to emulate that evocative, highly detailed style of writing. The story is peppered with my own little observations I made during my high school years, and I have tried to make my writing feel as authentic and real as possible. *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles is another beautiful semi-autobiographical novel that has informed my writing and influenced this story. The relationship between Gene and Phineas in that book is perhaps one of the most profoundly realized friendships I have read in literature, and it influenced my characterization of Sarah and Nell. Just like the two boys of Knowles’ novel, Sarah and Nell are quite different from each other, Sarah being quiet and keeping to herself, while Nell is loud and extroverted in contrast. I tried to make the relationship between the two as beautiful

and complicated as Knowles did with his characters. Just as Knowles tries to illustrate how Gene still loves his friend but feels subtle twinges of guilt for injuring him in a diving accident, so I try to instill that same sense of guilt in Sarah regarding things she shares, and her love-hate relationship with Nell. As far as the plot thread regarding Mr. Henry, I tried to convey the same frenzy regarding accusations as expressed in the great 2012 Danish movie *The Hunt*, starring Mads Mikkelsen. In the community depicted in the movie, accusations build to a fever pitch as rumors about pedophilia swirl around. I tried to convey that same frenzy of accusations in my writing, but I tried to incorporate a little more humor and awkwardness. I also purposely left the resolution of this story ambiguous, and don't confirm whether Mr. Henry was truly a pedophile or not. I did this because I wanted these stories to be a reflection of life, where not everything is neatly wrapped up in a little bow at the end.

A Little Bit About Me

I have been intimately involved with literature and creative writing my entire life. Both my grandfathers were tremendous collector of books. In his house in India, they had shelves upon shelves of literature ranging from pornographic penny novels to Dickensian classics. My maternal grandfather's favorite author was Graham Greene, and he would read his novels, such as *The Heart of the Matter*, over and over again until he could memorize entire paragraphs. He always encouraged me to read, and to read widely, taking on both literary works and "entertainments" as Greene would make the distinction between. I challenged myself to impress him and the rest of my family by reading the fattest, most epic novels possible, at times testing my attention span but ultimately honing my patience. I remember trying to take on behemoth novels like Stephen King's *Under the Dome* and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy with relish, and developing a love of fiction as a result. But despite my early infatuation with lengthy novels, as I grew older I gained a tremendous

appreciation for the art of the short story, where a whole world is conveyed in a few words. It started in high school when I was required to read Raymond Carver's *Cathedral* collection, and I fell in love with his gentle prose and the beautiful simplicity of his stories. Then I moved on to Stephen King's short stories and novellas, which reinforced my appreciation for the art of short fiction.

I tried my hand at writing short fiction for the first time in the ninth grade, during English class. That class was taught by a Polish woman, who, though English was her second language, had gained a mastery of it. She was a fan of the short story form as well, and we grew close as we were both the children of immigrants in a very Texan, very old money school populated by rich kids whose families had been in Dallas for generations. My early stories had a sort of childlike fantasy quality influenced by the video games I obsessively played, but, with practice and informed by the literature I was reading, my craft progressively improved. I was also extremely interested in biology in high school, and my two disparate interests in biology and creative writing pulled me in different directions, leading to a sort of internal conflict as I split my energy between the two desires.

Coming to the University of Texas was a tremendous turning point for me, as it allowed me to pursue both my interests in reading and writing (by being a part of the Plan II Honors Program) and science as I decided to double-major in neuroscience as well. Plan II has been tremendously influential in my development as a writer, giving me opportunities to engage this aspect of my life and personality that would have been inaccessible had I solely majored in neuroscience. The two introductory English classes all Plan II students are required to take helped me to truly think critically about what I am reading after years of disinterested instruction from sullen teachers in high school. Two semesters of philosophy sophomore year make me think about the relevancy of our existence and drove me to include human elements in my stories, to make them as meaningful and relatable as possible. And, taking the Writing Narratives Tutorial Course with Matt Valentine

helped to continue to sharpen the dull blade of my writing and kindled the flames of creativity, leading me to choose to write stories for my senior thesis.

It is my hope that my stories have some degree of relevancy for the people that choose to read them. My stories are quite dark. They are violent, profane (containing much more profanity than I actually use in real life) and often upsetting. But I'm not here to deliver happy endings to you. To me, the most interesting stories are ones where things go wrong, and where the characters are ambiguously good and evil. I try to create a subtle gray area in these stories with all my characterizations. I think conflict and violence are essential to the fabric of a story as we engage most with people in distress. While I do hope the reader enjoys my worlds, ultimately writing for me is a form of therapy, a way for me to reconcile experiences and feeling, to coalesce my thoughts into something concrete on the page. I think the best writing comes from when you write for your own enjoyment without explicitly tailoring your work to what others might find palatable, and, while I write for myself, I do hope that others find something enjoyable, or some reflection of their own lives, in my thoughts and experiences.

Brothers

“You think these tapered joggers’ll look good on me?”

Mac looks at me with expectant blue eyes, fishing for a compliment. He wants me to say that the pants will make his legs look jacked, like he lives in the gym, doing nothing but squats until someone screeches closing time on the PA system. He’s just tubby though, a body shaped by too many Animal Style burgers at In-N-Out, too many cases of Natty Light beer. The piss of the gods.

“Bro, those are too damn tight. They’re like yoga pants for men. Men ain’t supposed to wear yoga pants.”

“I bet these pants feel so good, though. I bet they make your quads feel like a bodybuilder’s. Look, they’re five percent elastane! They’re gonna look so damn good on me!”

A girl whose name is apparently Inga is eyeing us skeptically from behind the counter, claw-like nails clacking impatiently. It looks like Mac is about to go back to the changing room again to try on another outfit, and I’m trying my best not to doze off standing up. There’s a towering pile of stuff we’ve tried on next to the register, most of which isn’t gonna be bought. Poor little Inga is going to have to fold all those jackets back again, her nails getting in the way.

Mac slinks behind the plastic curtain, and I’m just standing there, not knowing what to do with my arms. So I slide my hands part of the way into my pockets, but not all the way, cause I don’t wanna look like a little kid getting punished by his mom.

“I’m sorry, he’s a bit... picky. He loves to shop. You couldn’t tell by looking at him.”

The girl says nothing and just stares off into the distance, lips smacking as she chews some stale piece of gum. I can smell the spearmint, or whatever the hell the flavor is, emanating from her mouth, and it’s starting to give me a bit of a headache. God, there are few things in this world that annoy me more than people who chew gum. Just brush your damn teeth.

Mac is back with a new fashionable item. He's dangling it proudly in front of his face, like a new dad showing off his baby. An alpine wool windbreaker in a muted shade of green. It's probably going to itch like hell, like cockroaches crawling all over your skin, but Mac would never admit that. Mac would wear the damn thing until he's so itchy he's scratching and drawing blood with his dirt-encrusted nails.

"This is dope. I'm gonna look way too damn good in this."

"It's fifty thousand króna. That is an excessive amount of money."

"Feel this," Mac extends the jacket to me, meaty fingers gripping it tightly. "Feel how soft it is. Like a baby's bottom."

"You could get the same shit at Cabela's for a quarter of the price."

"Yeah, and it's a quarter of the price there 'cause they've got some poor Bangladeshi kid making it. This is real Icelandic wool, bro. Handmade. You gotta pay for top quality."

"Alright, pay for it then and let's get moving. I haven't eaten since like seven this morning."

"Sure thing." Mac casually flings the jacket onto the counter and casts a glance at Inga, a small smile developing at the corners of his mouth, trying his best to look handsome. She isn't impressed, although I'm not quite sure Mac comprehends that. A gentle gurgle develops in my stomach, and I'm reminded of the inadequate continental breakfast at the Hilton, with its stiff croissants and watery espresso from an ancient machine. Goddamn, I need something to eat right now.

It's almost three in the afternoon and my hands are covered in grease from some authentic fish-and-chips place Mac wanted to go to. The two pieces of cod are parked in my stomach like a school bus, weighing me down, and I'm trying my best to keep my eyes pried open. Mac has finished with his meal a long time before me, not a hard feat given that his stomach is probably

twice the size of mine, and now he's drinking some foul ginger concoction the restaurant billed as homemade soda. I'd tried it and it tasted like shit, not the least bit sweet. Soda's supposed to be so sweet it overwhelms you, the sugar clinging to your teeth.

"Karina just texted me," Mac's scraggly-bearded face is lit up by the glow of his phone.

"She wants to know how the whale watching trip went."

"Tell her it was shit."

"I can't say that! She paid for it. I mean, she paid for it through her dad."

"We saw one damn whale in four hours. I was freezing my ass off on that rickety boat. God Mac, it felt like snot was leaking out of every hole."

"At least we saw something."

"It was a minke whale. Those things are goddamn tiny for whales, they're like the same size as you."

"Thanks for the compliment." Mac smirks and goes back to his phone, his fingers twitching rapidly, becoming an impressionistic blur. The flimsy chair, woven together with what appear to be reeds, is straining to support his considerable weight. When I first met him during rush week, he was tall and lanky, a state champion basketball player with humble country roots, talking in a southern drawl that almost made him sound stupid. Now, five years later, with a torn Achilles and an affinity for beer with the consistency of urine, the athleticism has evaporated, blown away in the wind. The lean sinews of his body are gone, replaced with blubber. The cockiness that carried him in high school was still there, though. The belief that every woman in the world deserved to be his. The breezy confidence that came with being a star athlete. He walked with his head up all the time, refusing to look at the ground. Arms swinging back and forth. There was something about him I never had, that I always secretly desired.

“Did I tell you about how the maid just barged into my room yesterday?” Mac wants to regale me with another story.

“You didn’t put the do not disturb sign up?”

“Nah, I forgot. I was passed out on the bed in my underwear and she walked in. We made eye contact for like a minute, and then she said sorry and left.”

“That sounds awkward as hell.”

“Nah man, she was so hot. Statuesque, six feet tall, green eyes. She must have been Yugoslavian.”

“Yugoslavia isn’t a country anymore.”

“Whatever. Eastern European. God, I wish we had maids like that in American hotels. What the hell is a woman like her even doing scrubbing toilets, anyway? She should be posing nude for Playboy or some shit like that.”

I’m starting to feel tired, the post-lunch coffee doing little to boost my flagging energy levels. I need a stiff drink. Something to perk me up.

“You still have those little vodka bottles?” I ask Mac.

“Those little plastic ones? The ones I stole from my sister’s wedding?”

“Yep, those are the ones.”

“I drank them all last night, bro.”

“You drank ‘em all last night? No wonder you were about to puke off the side of the boat! Seasick? More like hungover.” I chuckle.

“I held it in, though.”

“Good job. Let’s have a drink this evening. Or two.”

“At the hotel bar?” Mac raises a thick eyebrow.

“Hell no. I paid twenty dollars for a mojito there. Never again.”

“Where do you want to hit up?” Mac isn’t looking at me, he’s engrossed with his obscenely large phone, covering the entirety of his massive palm. Scrolling, scrolling, scrolling through something.

“There’s a place I read about. Kaffibarinn. It’s apparently really popular with the locals. We could try to blend in.”

“You’re not blending in anywhere here, bud,” Mac wryly smiles at me. “I can, though. I’ve got Viking blood on my dad’s side.”

“Let’s just go to Kaffibarinn. I’m tired of drinking with fossilized expats.”

“You’re the captain of this ship.” Mac goes back to his phone, and I gently wipe the grease off my fingers, looking outside at the light snow dusting the cobblestone streets, the signs in words that would twist my tongue if I tried to pronounce them. I need a drink to calm these nerves, these jitters. I just need something to ease my mind.

I wake up from a brief nap, hair mussed up, eyes straining to focus. The fish is still sitting heavy, still weighing my stomach down. I turn on the television in a desperate bid to rouse myself, and some British woman with raven hair and twenty pounds of makeup on greets me. World’s Worst Experiences Abroad is what the show’s called, apparently. She’s talking about how she was in Dubai and accidentally took a beer from the hotel room with her outside. The cab driver took her straight to the cops, and she spent two years in a women’s prison getting her shit pushed in. Just like that. Lord, goddamn these trash reality shows, with their overdramatic music and eager narration.

I run a hot shower for some relief, but of course it stinks of fuckin’ sulfur, like all the tap water here. My tour guide told me it was because all the water comes from geothermal volcanic plants. It’s obviously great having hot water whenever you want, but the sulfur smell. It clings to

your skin and doesn't let go. I'm sure everyone here is used to it, which is why they walk around like everything's normal, but I still can't fathom the acceptance of this. Give me a cold shower that doesn't smell like festering eggs any day.

Looking at myself in the mirror, I still seem a bit tired, a bit haggard. Grey circles pooling under my eyes, not enough to make me look tired but enough to be bothersome. Virgin stubble's peeking out, but I've got no desire to shave. I'll just go with the manicured sloppiness. My phone vibrates on the marble countertop. A selfie of Mac pops up on the screen, skunky can of Carlsberg in one hand, glinting Rolex on the other, a gift from his eccentric venture capitalist uncle. He's brimming with excitement, ready to go, the world's worst wingman at his side. He always told me that my dour mood attracts goth girls, the ones he had an irrational lust for. The girls with hair dyed jet black and a tapestry of tattoos covering their bodies, the ones who would get dirty looks in our small New Mexico town, prayers mumbled in their wake.

The pills I was given are by the television, in a nondescript plastic bottle. I stuff them into an oversized jacket pocket and bend down to tie my shoes, back stiff, pausing briefly to look out the window. Two weeks in and I'm starting to tire of this place. The constant grey skies, the frigid winds blowing in from the west, the miserable-looking people shuffling with hands in pockets, staring at the ground, doing everything they can to avoid eye contact. The piss-colored sun weakly peeking out at noon and retreating four hours later. They say Reykjavik has the highest suicide rate of any city in Europe. I don't doubt that.

The bar isn't quite what I imagined. It's a nondescript red house that looks like a barn, tucked onto a side street, squeezed by the buildings around it. There are a few chairs and tables outside with people buzzing around them, while the interiors have been hollowed out to create space for a bar and dancefloor. It's suffocating, far too small to house so many people, probably

breaking multiple fire codes in the process. I remember the bouncer looking at me like I was some sort of insect, relishing the chance to reject me, until Mac stepped up beside me, with his straw-colored hair, the obscene stones in his watch glinting in the lamppost's glow.

“He’s with me.”

The faintest of nods and the bouncer tells us we can go in. Like a piece of wood floating in a raging river, we’re swept up by the swelling throng of people, the scent of sweat and beer enveloping us, until we’re pinned up against a wall next to a black-and-white portrait of a cross-looking young boy, arms folded. Singsong foreign syllables echo all around us as my ears strain to hear even one merciful word of English. I follow Mac, his big body clearing space around us like a bulldozer, as we claw our way to a bar made of wood that looks almost rotten. Planting ourselves on one corner, we try to get the attention of the barkeep, a towering, bearded hunk of a man who could convincingly portray Thor in the next Marvel movie. After some frantic hand-waving and a few phrases reluctantly stuttered out in Icelandic, we finally get two pints slammed down in front of us. 1200 króna each. Not much of a bargain. But the beer is cold and refreshing, the bubbles twinkling in the amber liquid, and I swallow it down with the relish of a man dying of thirst.

I grab another drink, my eyes fixated on the pulsating mass of humanity in front of me. Two tall girls jump up and down wildly, their bodies moving into and out of sync with the throbbing bass, ignoring the rest of the world around them, fixated on each other. Truly dancing like no one is watching. I would look absolutely ridiculous if I tried to do that with my stiff joints, my gangly arms hanging limply by my side. I would never be able to let go of my self-consciousness, of the constant awareness of my own presence. I can feel something rising up within me, a little bit of tension, the latent claustrophobia always lurking just underneath the surface.

Mac is gazing longingly at some girl with her back turned to us, eating her alive with his eyes. His glance lingers at her heels, moving up to her Rapunzel-esque hair, and back down again.

He must be on his fifth beer of the evening already. I can tell because his breathing is heavier and more labored, sweat droplets beading on his forehead. He always becomes drenched when he drinks too much. He's clutching his beer tightly, so tight I'm concerned the glass might crack in his hand. I could have sworn just a few seconds ago the glass was full to the brim, and now it's almost all gone, as if there was a hole in the bottom. Perhaps the most useful thing being fraternity brothers taught us was how to drink like fucking fishes.

"Mac, I don't think you could stare any less subtly if you tried."

"What the hell do these Nordic women eat, man? How are they so..."

"Sturdy?"

"Sturdy. Solidly built. Those are the words I'm looking for."

I take another sip of Tuborg. The bassline from the speakers is vibrating the room, drilling a hole into my ear. I can barely hear my own thoughts, let alone Mac who's just a foot away from me, perched on the barstool like a gargoyle. I raise my voice, strain my vocal cords to try and talk to him.

"I'm pretty sure they eat nothing but meat and cheese up here. Protein-rich diet. That's why they're so damn tall."

"Man, food is so goddamn expensive here, you would think everyone would look skeletal 'cause they can't afford to eat." Mac replies.

"They make a shitload of money, though. At least compared to us, they do." I'm scratching my forearm hair with my fingers, running my nails through the strands. "It's normal for them to pay like three bucks for a banana."

"I guess that make sense. I mean, you can't grow anything on all the damn rock and ice around here. I can see why fruits are expensive."

The woman we were so eagerly eyeing is now talking to some imposing guy, laughing and grinning. They're chattering in Icelandic, and I can see Mac's expression sour, his brow furrow with unknown thoughts. He raises the glass to his lips again and again and again, the beer disappearing like a magic trick.

"I can't see why you would care how expensive something is. Bro, I mean, you're rich! Look at your wrist," I tell him.

"I'm not rich. My dad is."

"Does the price of produce really bother you that much, though?"

"Yes, it does. Rich people don't get rich by spending money. My dad always said that."

"Fair enough." My phone's gently vibrating against my thigh. I look at Mac and he's faced away from me, his drifting eyes already fixated on another object of desire. I slide my phone out of my pocket and look at the glowing text. She's here, waiting for me.

"I'm gonna go smoke a cig real quick," I pat Mac on the shoulder. He doesn't say anything to me as the gears turn in his head, as he plots the right lines to say, the right tone of voice to take, the right woman to talk to. It was so much easier for him in high school, in his little town of twenty thousand. Back when everyone knew who he was, when he was swishing three-point shots and rattling rims with his dunks at Las Cruces. Here, in an alien country, I could see his veneer of confidence, of machismo, start to crack.

I make my way to the bathroom, its walls scrawled with creative profanities and cartoon characters in various compromising positions. Some poor bloke is passed out headfirst in the urinal trough, splayed out like a chalk outline on the sidewalk. I gently drag his body away from the stainless steel and finally get the opportunity to take a piss, to exorcize all the swirling Tuborg and Carlsberg from my body. As expected, there's no soap in the dispenser hanging by a thread on the tiled wall, so I give my hands, with their nails bitten through to the quick, the most cursory of

rinses. Emerging from the restroom, I tiptoe my way to the back exit, and emerge into the cold. Snowflakes are dancing around, and the wind is biting cold, burrowing its way under the folds of my jacket and gnawing me. Karina is standing there in the cold, hands buried in her pockets. My height, with hair the darkest shade of brown possible, her frame dancing on the line between too thin and healthy.

“Can I have cigarette?” she asks me. Her accent is hard to place, maybe Russian, maybe Ukrainian. Somewhere from those frozen wastelands in the east. The syllables sharp and overexaggerated.

I hand her my American flag Bic and a menthol cigarette.

“You have something that is better than menthol?”

“No. And make it quick.”

Karina shields the flame with her slender, piano-player fingers and lights the Newport. She takes a drag for what seems like an eternity and looks off into the harbor, the small waves slapping against jagged rocks, the sharp cries of seagulls cutting through the air.

“You have what was asked to bring?”

I dig into my jacket pocket and hand her the pill bottle, the nondescript white tablets clinking inside. Almost instantaneously she slips it inside her purse, casting a quick glance like a cat to make sure no one has seen before returning to her cigarette, its end glowing furiously in the fading evening light.

I put a hand on her shoulder, my thumb pressing against her collarbone, looking into her shimmering eyes. The menthol is wafting into my nostrils and starting to tickle the back of my throat.

“Please don’t screw this up. If you do, both of our heads roll.”

“Heads roll? What do you mean?”

“It’s... It’s just a figure of speech. Listen, all I’m saying is don’t kill him. He’s had too much to drink already.

Karina glares at me with the fire of a hundred suns, and, quickly adjusting her hair, brushes my hand away and storms off into Kaffibarinn. I listen to her flats clatter against the cold pavement, letting the wind slap me around, trying not to smell the sickly sweetness of the garbage in the alley. Despite all the beer lubricating my throat, it still feels dry, and it’s getting harder and harder to breathe, more difficult to swallow with each passing moment. I sit down on some steps, the jagged metal poking at me, and try to think. Scrolling through my phone, I see the text messages, saved under a fake name, that started all this shit. I scroll all the way to the very top.

I know what you two did.

* * *

Where the hell is Kieran at? It doesn’t take *that* long to smoke a cigarette, does it? He’s probably back on the powder again. That boy, he gets on his bony knees and swears to God he doesn’t have a problem, but I know he does. Always sniffing, always with a runny nose. He’s lost weight too, recently. We used to pump iron together. Deadlifts, squats, bench press, all that shit. Then he started giving me excuses. He started telling me he had work to do. Bro, you’re a philosophy major. All you’ve got to do is sound smart, pretend like you know what you’re talking about in class, and you’re good to go. Don’t pretend like you’re busy. At least I have to use a calculator every once in a while.

There are some almonds in a dish on the counter and I’m mindlessly popping them like pills. I really need to stop eating. Do some more cardio, run on a Nordic Track, maybe pick up a basketball again. The last girl I fucked, she said I had a dad bod. And that it was cute. But that shit,

it cut me deep. No 23-year-old wants to be reminded that he's aging. Getting older. Look, I know my hair is thinning and I'm a couple pounds heavier than I should be. I see it in the mirror every day and I'm growing tired of it. Don't celebrate it like it's some ideal.

There's a pretty young girl who just slid up on the stool next to me. Slim, brunette, emerald green eyes. Skin so pale it reminds me of the porcelain in my dad's dining room, in a glass cabinet on display for whatever esteemed guest stops by. She's giving me a nervous but interested side-eye. Should I grow a pair and say something? It would be a waste if I spent the whole night just sitting here, drinking myself into oblivion.

"You are American?" she asks me with a thick accent. Not Icelandic. Russian or something like that. I can't tell, all those damn Eastern European accents sound the same to me.

"How could you tell? Uh, besides the accent, of course."

"You are not wearing jacket. Only Americans do not wear jacket when it is cold."

"Well, I spend a lot of time in Colorado skiing. So I'm used to the cold. Besides, it's kind of warm in here."

"I see." She's broken off eye contact with me, fiddling with a button on her dress and twirling a strand of hair at the same time.

"Where are you from?" I straighten my back, slowly emerging from the slouch on my stool, and ask her.

"Romania."

"Romania? I don't know much about Romania, but I've heard it's a nice place to vacation. Cheap... I mean affordable. One of my buddies, he went there and had a great time. Stag party right before he got married."

"What is stag party?" she asks me, eyes wide and bright.

“Oh, it’s like, a guy’s last celebration with his friends before settling down. One last chance to go wild and have fun, do the crazy things he can’t do when he’s married. Usually strippers are involved.”

“That is cool. That is fun.” She looks at me again, smiling coyly, bearing a slight snaggletooth.

“Yeah, it’s great. I’ve, um, been to a few myself. Hey, I didn’t get your name. What is it?”

“Maria.” She extends a slender hand toward me, and I take it, squeezing gently but firmly. Assert dominance. Show confidence in yourself. That’s what dad always used to tell me.

“Hey Maria, I’m Mac.” I take another sip of beer. Shit, I must on my sixth pint of the day. I should probably start to reel it in. “Let me get you something to drink. What do you want?”

“It’s okay. Not necessary.”

“Nah, it’s all good. I appreciate the company and I’d feel awful if you just sat there with nothing while I drink like a fish.” I give her my best smile.

Maria sits there for a few almost interminable moments, the gears churning in her head. After a while, she points a red fingernail toward a list of cocktails scrawled on a blackboard in chalk.

“Tom Collins? Maybe?” She looks at me with a puppy dog stare. Expensive as fuck, but I’m not going to complain if it pays off at the end of the night.

I shove a few bills toward the bartender, who’s looking at us with a quizzical stare. “Let me get a Tom Collins. You know what, let me get two of them. And put Tanqueray in it. Not that cheap Seagram’s shit.”

I try to give Maria my warmest smile. “Good choice. I’m a pretty big fan of gin too.”

It's three in the morning and I'm in the back of a cab that smells like stale cigarettes because there's no goddamn Uber in Iceland. Kieran sent me a brief message saying he was going back home because he felt sick and then radio silence. He couldn't tell me that to my face? I've stretched out as much as my 6'4" frame can, knees bumping against the seat in front of me, because I know I'll puke if I bend over too much. I told Maria to come back to my place for one more drink once Kaffibarinn was closed, and she smiled and obliged, but now she's distant. Staring out the window. The driver, dark and heavily bearded, keeps glancing at us suspiciously in the rearview mirror. He probably thinks Maria's a working girl. Is she? I don't know. She would have asked for money if she was, right?

My head's pounding, man, and the high-pitched Arabian music bleeding from the speakers is making it even worse. I can feel every individual vein in my forehead, a sharp migraine coming on. I've never felt this awful when I drank before. A couple beers, a few cocktails, that's usually easy work for me. Good God, something I drank is doing me in right now. Was it the gin? I hadn't had gin in a while before tonight. I'm squeezing my eyes shut and trying not to throw up. Trying to remember what my therapist told me whenever I feel anxious. Name the colors of objects you can see. Black water of the harbor, black night sky, black road, everything is dark. Fuck, it's not working.

I tap on the driver's headrest to get his attention. "Can you pull over? We can walk the rest of the way."

Maria looks at me, mouthing the words back silently. "Pull over?"

I reach into my wallet, dangling a fistful of bills in front near his head. "Stop here. This is a good place to stop, man."

The cabbie snatches up my money and the brakes screech. The passenger door clicks open and I stumble onto the pothole-dotted pavement. Maria lunges after me, a look of concern

on her face, hand on my back. The cab zooms away, belching greyish smoke. I'm seated on the edge of the pavement, in front of a bus stop that smells like cat piss. Sucking in cold air, trying to fight this creeping headache.

"You are okay?" Maria asks me. "You can walk to hotel?"

"I'm good. I'm fine. I just need a couple minutes to catch my breath."

I drag myself inside the bus stop, taking a seat on a thin metal bench. A tattered poster for some local punk rock band flaps in the wind. Graffiti is etched on every square inch of the glass. I'm trying to focus on a neon sign in the distance. American Style Burgers. Darkness creeps into the edges of my vision. I really hope I don't black out and have to go to the hospital. At least Maria is there if shit goes too far. She's pacing back and forth. Like a caged animal. Talking to someone on the phone. I can't understand what the hell she's saying. Some weird foreign mumbo-jumbo that don't make any sense.

"Maria, come here for a second."

Maria isn't listening to me. She seems increasingly agitated, gesturing wildly to the invisible person on the other side of the phone line. I'm calling her name, trying to get her attention, but I can't even hear myself speak. It feels like my words are echoing off the walls, but we're out in the open air. It feels like I'm wearing lead gloves, I'm unable to lift my arms. I look back at Maria and she's a blurry slim figure off in the distance. My vision's fading and I know, no matter how hard I try to fight it, that I'm going to slip out of consciousness.

It's cold. So cold. I try to pry open my eyes, and it takes every ounce of effort I've got. A drop of water falls onto my eyelid, temporarily blinding me, and my eyes retreat into their sockets. I wait a few minutes for my body to warm up, trying to gain back the feeling in my limbs. The only thing I can move right now is my neck, and I strain to lift it, to see where I am. I'm planted in a

bathtub, naked except for the dirty pair of Tommy Hilfiger underwear I've been wearing two days in a row. This... This isn't my hotel room. My hotel room didn't have a bathtub, only a shower with barely enough room to fit me. To my left are grubby tiles that look like they haven't been cleaned in years. I twist my head to the right, and, damn! It's Kieran. He's seated on the toilet, hands folded. His familiar shock of red hair is a welcome sight. He's not looking at me. I try to get his attention.

"Kieran, bro!" I try to speak, but the words come out as a soft mumble. He's not listening to me. But I'm glad he found me. I was fucked up there for a moment. God, I'm glad Kieran knew... he knew where to find me? That's... We never made it to my hotel room. All I texted him was that I was going back to the hotel with a girl I met. And we both never made it there. Did Maria get into my phone and call Kieran? That's smart... but she didn't know my passcode. She couldn't have. Thoughts are racing through my mind, and I'm starting to feel sick again. I need to throw up. I reach toward Kieran, trying to get his attention so I can get him off the toilet, get him to lift the lid. My left hand tries to grip the edge of the tub and a sharp pain digs into my wrist. A shackle, holding me back, chained to the water pipe. Why the hell am I handcuffed? The clink of chains snaps Kieran into focus, and he looks at me, sharp worry etched on his face. I try to touch him again and the chain again resists me, holding me back.

"Kieran, bro, I'm not into S&M! You can uncuff me!" I try to smile at him, play into what must be a party trick. His idea of fun. We used to do shit like this all the time in Alpha Delta. Paddling, getting pledges to strip naked, making them crawl through mud. Innocent male bonding shit. The type of shit that goes on at every college in America. But he's not smiling back at me. He's not laughing like he used to laugh. His face is stony, expressionless. Some sort of fear is starting to creep into my gut.

"Really, you can let me go. I'm sober now."

“I’m so sorry.” Kieran is trembling, his eyes moist. I’ve never seen him like this, an emotional wreck.

“What?”

“I’m so sorry I have to do this.” Kieran looks toward the bathroom door, face flushed, the veins in his neck protruding. “Karina, come.”

The door squeaks open and a slim girl steps in. The same girl I met at Kaffibarinn, except now her hair is done up in a tight ponytail, exposing a swath of forehead that previously wasn’t there. She’s got a camera in her hand. A big, clunky one. The type that’s good enough to shoot movies. Karina hoists the device, her thin arms straining to hold it up. A click and it’s on, pointed toward me. My skin feels clammy, I’m having difficulty swallowing. It’s getting harder and harder to breathe.

“You need to say something. Say some words for the camera.” Kieran tells me. He’s trying to control his shivers. I want to rip my fucking shackles off, tear the pipes from the wall, bash him over the head until his brains turn to mush. But I can’t move. The cuffs are digging into my wrists, and the pain is sharp.

“What the hell do you want me to say? Stop playing these games with me, Kieran!”

“We need, well, you need to apologize.”

“Apologize for what? What the hell have I done?” I want to cry, I can feel the tears gathering, but I’m trying to stay strong. Not show panic or fear. The words my father said.

“God Mac, you know exactly what I’m talking about. Just say the words. Say the damn words.”

“Enlighten me! Tell me exactly what you want me to say.!”

“Say that you’re deeply sorry. Cry. Show that you mean it. Say you had too many drinks and never saw them by the side of the road. Jesus, Mac, just take some responsibility for once!”

Kieran is angry now, his face flushed.

“Responsibility?” I’m trying my best to swallow my anger, but I can’t take all the blame. I can’t lay here shackled up while Kieran prances around, not having to suffer like me. “You were the one who convinced me to drive. You were the one who was too goddamn cheap to take an Uber.”

“Mac, I was completely numb. I could barely stand. You had less than me. God, you should have just punched me in the face back then, knocked some goddamn sense into me.” Kieran is sobbing now, choking on his words. Maria, or rather Karina, is still holding the camera, her face twisted with some unspeakable rage. Those eyes, those high cheekbones, they looked eerily familiar. Similar to the one that greeted me on the asphalt that night. But that face was bloodied, the skin on her arms and legs torn off by the gravel. A pregnant belly protruding out. An old lady who had been sitting next to her, the seatbelt cutting into her neck like a guillotine. All of it my doing, the work of my hands. I remember stumbling out of the Hummer, seeing the little car we hit shattered into a million pieces. Kieran frozen with fear, refusing to leave the passenger seat. I can clearly envision making a mad dash back to my car, the cold air pressing against me. Kieran trembling slightly, me pressing my foot down on the accelerator, the tires screaming and whining.

That night I told my dad. The two of us, along with Kieran, hunched around the island in the kitchen. A stinging slap to my face, a diamond-studded class ring splitting my lip open. A metallic tang in my mouth as my father started making phone calls, his meaty fingers punching away at his Blackberry.

*I’ve got a situation here. Someone close to me, he may have been involved in a hit-and-run.
Near mile marker 235.*

Eddie, I need your men to just... take their time with this investigation. For the love of God, don't rush it. Fucking file it away in some cabinet.

The pregnant lady, she was in the country illegally? Overstayed a tourist visa? God, that's... that's a blessing. Thank you for letting me know this.

“Tell him to say sorry. He must apologize.” Karina can't hoist the camera anymore, and she clangs it down on the counter, pointed toward me. Kieran is shuffling back and forth like a caged leopard, nails shoved in his mouth.

“Mac, buddy, all you have to do is say sorry. All you gotta do is admit you were wrong. Say to the camera I drank too much. Say to the camera I killed a woman and an unborn child. Say I ran away like the coward I am.” Kieran stutters the lines out like an actor reciting an unfamiliar script, and Karina nods at him in acceptance.

“God, Kieran, I...”

“Just say it! Say it and this goddam ordeal will be over! Say it and Karina will get the keys! Free you!” Kieran is exasperated, his brow furrowed as deeply as possible, his eyes staring into my soul.

“Fuck! I'll say it if it makes her happy! God Karina, I'm sorry! I don't know what those women meant to your family, but I'm sorry for taking them from your life! I screwed up, and I drank too much, and... God, it's my fault!” I can't hold back the tears anymore and they stream down my face, curl down my chin. A flick and the camera switches off.

“Thank you for say this,” Karina hisses in her broken English, and I can hear the venom in her voice, the anguish. “But it is not enough. You must hurt. Like when you hurt women.”

“God, Mar- Karina, I am hurt! I'm showing you how hurt I am! Can you see these tears!” I rattle my cuffs, cuts emerging on my wrist, but the struggle is futile, the pipe bolted too tightly to the wall.

“Hurt him.” Karina glares at Kieran. “This you have done too. Hurt him.”

Kieran continues to shiver like a dog, his arms wrapped meekly around himself. “I can’t do this He’s- he’s my friend. Please don’t do this us.”

“Do what I say. You will do it! A stream of spittle flies from Karina’s mouth, landing on Kieran’s nose and collar. He doesn’t even bother to wipe it off, his eyes hollow, like a soldier standing on the battlefield.

“Please, Karina. I’m begging you. Please. You never asked me to do anything like this when you first talked to me.”

A resounding click and a gun is pressed into Kieran’s ribs, its steel somehow glinting in the low light.

“Do it. Or you will be kill too.”

Kieran is shuffling up to me slowly, head down, like a kid in the classroom who has been punished.

“Please forgive me.” His shoulders are slouched, it feels like his arms are hanging nearly low enough to touch the ground.

“Forgive you for what. What are you going to do me?”

“I never knew it would get this bad. I would have left Reykjavik, made you take the first flight home, come with me if I ever knew it would get this bad. I’m so sorry.”

“Kieran, what...” He reaches over me and turns the handle of the shower all the way to the left. Fuck, fuck, fuck, I can hear the hissing of the pipes, smell the sulfurous stink of Iceland’s water bubbling up. The walls are screeching, the stench coming closer and closer. I try to jerk my wrist out of the cuff, but it exacerbates the already sizable gash, blood pouring from the wound, dripping down the sides of the tub. The water comes and cascades all over my face and chest. Hotter than the fires of hell. Lighting my skin on fire, burrowing its way anywhere it can fit. I try to

scream but I can't even hear myself over the hissing steam, over the water roaring like the tallest waterfall, filling my ears with painful noise. Everything burns, everything hurts. It feels like I'm being sliced open with a thousand knives. I'm thrashing and thrashing like a fish out of water. Kieran's on his knees like a man in prayer, unable to look. Karina just stands there. Stands there with smug fuckin' satisfaction on her face. I can't even think anymore, every sense thrown away except for pain. Karina ambles over and turns the faucet off, but it doesn't matter, there's still a wildfire tearing its way across my skin.

My chest is heaving, I'm yelling out in pain. Trying to desperately suck in some air. The only part of my body untouched by the boiling water are my feet, and I shake them desperately, in a hope of spreading the sensation there to the rest of my body.

"Do it again." Karina swiftly kicks Kieran, and he yelps and gets up. His hand touches the faucet, shaking like a disease has gotten hold of him. The sinews in his neck straining, he turns the faucet back on, stepping away like he just touched a leper, and the water comes forth again. I'm screaming and thrashing and burning and I can hear a crack as the segment of pipe I'm chained to breaks free, dangling from. Freed from my restraints, I burst out of the tub like a ghoul emerging from the grave, swinging my shackles wildly, charging toward Karina and Kieran directly in front of me. Utter shock is painted on Kieran's face. I see Karina raising the gun toward me, and I bow down, ducking behind Kieran. There's a deafening crack as the gun fires and Kieran crumples to the ground, but the echo of gunfire can't stop me, not when all this pain is surging me forward. Karina is fumbling, trying to get in another shot, but the bathroom is small and in just three steps I slam into her, the pistol skidding across the dirty tiles. She tries to reach for it, but I slam her wrist down with my foot, pinning it against the tiles. My skin is afire, my vision clouded with blood, but adrenaline is keeping me alive. All I can feel is pain and anger. Her slim body is nothing without the gun, weak and defenseless, pinned down by my size. The splintered-off piece of pipe is

dangling from my limp, bloodied wrist, poking into her cheek. She's staring at me, searching for some sort of mercy in my face, her eyes watery and quivering.

The camera is within my reach, perched on one corner of the marble countertop. I grab it, feeling its weight, its heaviness, the cool metal aggravating my singed hands. I clutch it with two hands as tightly as possible, like I'm holding on to my child, raising it above my head as far as I can, my elbows fully extended. And then I bring it down. Raise it up and bring it down again. My eyes are closed because I can't bear to see what I'm doing, but I can hear everything. The crunching of bone, the soft gurgles. Warm blood splattering on my hands and face. One more blow and it's over and I let the camera clatter on the tiles. Nausea is creeping up within me, and the room is twirling like a top. I scurry to one corner of the bathroom like a cockroach, burying my head into the cool tile, trying my best to not look at Karina. Or what's left of her.

"Karina? Karina?" I can hear a booming voice echoing through the halls, making its way into the bathroom. Peeling myself away from the wall, I look at the mess I made. Kieran, a blossoming red dot in the middle of his forehead, the life snuffed out of his eyes. Karina, fuck, Karina... Looking at her makes the vomit creep up my throat a little bit more. "Karina!" the disembodied voice calls out once more, distinctly Eastern European, no doubt one of Katrina's compatriots. I can hear a door slam, but it's distant. It must mean he's downstairs. Fuck, I've got to try and make it out of here. I have to try. Slow, plodding footsteps are approaching.

I hoist myself up and look out the bathroom window. It's a compact square, barely big enough for someone like me to slip through. I can see a single black car, a Mercedes, parked in the driveway of a house. There is nothing I can see except for snow and trees. It might be Karina's car. I turn toward her and dig through the pockets of her skinny jeans, my torn and tattered hand struggling to fit, as I look away from her desecrated face. I feel jagged teeth dig into my finger. I dig the fob out, and the Mercedes logo lovingly greets me. The footsteps are getting closer and closer

and the adrenaline is shooting through my veins. I scramble to the door and lock it. It's hefty. It can hold for a little bit. I turn back to the window and try to pry it open, but my fingers are too fucking numb to do it and it hurts just to touch the chilled window. The fucking pipe chained to my wrist is getting in the way, blocking my movements. I can't open the goddamn window. I'm going to have to break it. Fuck, I'm going to have to shatter it somehow.

He's here. God damn it, he's here. He's babbling in some unknown language and banging on the door. I claw at the locking mechanism one more time. It's not budging. The blood is dripping from my cut palms and fingers and there's no time left. I pick up the pipe with my right hand as it's still chained to my left and drive it into the window. Cracks spiderweb through the glass. I drive the pipe into the window again like I'm driving a stake into the heart of a vampire. Another crunch and more cracks appear. I scream as I unleashed a third hit and I can hear the crash, feel the shards spray my face. The cold instantly blasts me, tearing into my exposed skin. I can't even think or feel now, every nerve is firing, every inch of my body is in searing pain. I clamber up the counter, letting the shards slice my feet, gripping the keys like they are my only child, tumbling onto a snow embankment below. I spring toward the car, frantically pressing the buttons on the fob, and the car pings back at me. I'm stumbling in the snow, trying to reach the vehicle, the pipe still chained to me and clattering against me. I can hear piercing blows as my pursuer drives his body into the thick wood of the bathroom door, and I churn my legs forward, motoring onwards.

I reach the Mercedes and jerk the door open, nearly ripping it off the hinges. The car is a push-to-start model and I jam my finger into the button, making it roar to life like a lion. I hear a yell as the man pokes his head through, but I'm already gone, tires kicking up snow. I'm tearing down a desolate country road, with no idea where the fuck I am, and the adrenaline is still

throbbing as the tears roll down my face, as vomit splatters onto my lap and the steering wheel. I can't think. All I can hear is the blood crashing in my head like waves on a rocky shore.

* * *

The walls of the interrogation room are bare and unadorned, painted a pallid light blue. A small radiator is churning away in one corner, trying its best but unable to keep out the cold. Ingrid, the cop assigned to my case, looks at me with steely blue eyes, a lukewarm cup of coffee balanced in her hands. Her hair's pulled back in a painfully tight ponytail. The scars on my wrist are still raw and painful. It's a miracle I didn't bleed to death like some suicide victim, slit wrists wet and gaping.

"So, you were drugged at the bar, then? They slipped something into your drink?"

"Yes. I didn't know either of them. That Irish man and that Russian lady, or whatever she was. They were so friendly. They bought me a drink, I bummed some cigarettes off them. I couldn't know what they were going to do to me!" I'm looking at her with puppy dog eyes, trying to dig up some sympathy.

"I am very scared that this happened to you. You know, in Iceland we never have violence like this."

"I liked them because they spoke English. They were so nice to me. I should have never trusted them."

"Yes, nowadays you do not know who you can trust." She's looking past my shoulder, at the clock on the wall reading ten past five. I know she's eager to leave, to get this questioning over with.

"I just want to go home now. Back to America."

"Of course. But you must wait a little bit longer."

“Why?”

“We need to find out where they are. If those two are still in our country, they could be hurting more people. Are you sure you don’t remember where they kept you?”

“God, no. I drove around for hours not knowing where I was. I’ve never been to this country before. I was just in a panic. I just want to go, please.”

Ingrid hoists herself out of the barebones plastic chair she’s seated in with considerable effort. “Another officer will come talk to you, now. He knows this country so well. Grew up in a fishing village in the northeast. Maybe he can help us find where you were kept.”

“Wait, don’t leave.” Ingrid slips on her coat, so tight it looks like a straitjacket on her. “I need to make a phone call. To my dad.”

She hesitates, thinking for a second. Eventually she digs a hand into an oversized pocket and slides a flip phone across the table. A cheap plasticky piece of shit, the type nobody’s used since 2005.

My body trembling, the room feeling colder and colder with every passing moment, I press the keys on the phone. Flat and unresponsive, the buttons require Herculean effort to press. 575, the area code for Las Cruces. I’ve never missed the searing desert heat, the unimpeded sun, more than now.

The phone trills for an interminable amount of time before father finally picks up. His voice is slurred, drowsy. I don’t know if he’s been hitting the bottle again or if I just woke him up from his slumber. But just hearing his voice soothes me.

“Hello, daddy? Daddy? I’m fine, don’t worry, but something happened, and I need your help.”

Whispers

Growing up, I was significantly stronger than my brother. I recall when we were snout-nosed little kids, wrestling in the backyard, the insects nipping at our wrists and ankles. It would be a minute tops before I had him pinned down, one of his arms twisted in agony, the other trying to yank at my ponytail. I had him beat in footraces too. He had an awkward little gait when running, his feet pointed inwards like someone had dislocated them slightly, his legs churning as he used up every ounce of energy to try and get in front of me. It didn't matter how hard he tried because he would always be tasting my dust. I would slow up near the finish line, drawn in chalk on the cracked blacktop, give him a glimmer of hope, then accelerate at the last possible second, tongue out to taunt him. I know he resented me for all this. He would force a laugh and act like it was no sweat off his back, but in his irises, I could see a seething anger, the veins in his eyes pulsing and inflamed.

I know my dad disliked me, too, for being better at sports than his only son. I was the girl, meant to be demure and docile, but I was built better than him. My shoulders were wider, my waist narrower, my thighs stronger. Dad would look at me and joke that I had "hindquarters like a horse," but I'm sure he was disappointed my brother was weak and I wasn't. I know he was mad his only son wasn't the musclebound stud you see in all those melodramatic sports movies. He always envisioned Ronnie Jr. being the star quarterback, just like he was in his glory days, but it's a bit hard to play football when you're 140 pounds soaking wet. My brother was stuffed like a Thanksgiving turkey, fed steaks and powdered protein shakes, but no matter how hard those raising him tried, he continued looking like a scarecrow with a tee shirt on. At family gatherings, slices of salty ham and scoops of lumpy mashed potatoes would be slopped onto his plate like he was livestock. Grandma would stare lovingly at him, her shriveled hands intertwined. When he was

fourteen, they found out he had lupus. His own body was eating him alive. That was all it took to kiss goodbye to his football dreams.

Basketball ended up being my passion, the spark that made me want to cast off the sheets and rub the crust out of my eyes every morning. An escape from the monotony of suburbia, to be pretentious. I made varsity when I was a freshman, and by November of that year I was the starting point guard for All Saints Catholic School. I wasn't the tallest girl on the court, certainly, but I was fast, a blur going from baseline to baseline. I could take the ball to the rim, stop in an instant and shoot a three-pointer, or score anywhere in between. I was strong, too. Those bitches at Northaven High would shove me, pull my hair when the referee wasn't looking, throw elbows, try to rattle me, but I never let them fuck with me. Junior year and I was averaging twenty points and ten assists a game. Then dad pulled me off the team, stopped paying the dues. Told me he needed money for Ronnie's treatments. Told me I wasn't good enough to go pro, and to stop throwing my life away and study harder.

Now it's just me and Nell, sitting in the bleachers outside with their nasty metallic smell, watching the skinny cross-country boys run laps while that mustachioed prick Rover yells at them, strutting around in a varsity jacket two sizes too small. I'm dribbling a ball between my legs, back and forth, back and forth. The grooves and bumps of the leather, they feel more natural to me than my own skin. It's hot and I can feel sweat start to bead like morning dew on my forehead and under my arms, but I don't want to leave just yet. I want to bathe in the warmth a little bit more.

"We should go work on that *Great Expectations* essay," she tells me in her high-strung voice. "Look, I know it's the most boring book ever written, but we've got to get it done by tomorrow morning," she adds after I don't respond, thousand-yard staring into the distance.

"Nell, I really don't feel like doing it. I kind of just want to take a nap. The nurse's office got beds."

“Don’t give in! Drink a Red Bull or something and perk up. You can do it, I’m sure. I’ll help you, of course.

“I’ll give you twenty if you write it for me.”

“You’ll give me two bucks an hour? Because it’s going to take like ten hours to write this shit. How generous.” Nell chuckles and places a hand on the small of my back. “Let’s go to the library. Get in the studying mood.”

We walk to the library, going past the lunchroom, with its stained carpet and plastic folding chairs, past a throng of giggling third graders, their happiness still uncorrupted by the looming pressure of college, by nights with eyes pried open by Adderall. Past the gym where I used to play, hair wound in the tightest ponytail possible, slipping and tumbling across the polished wood floors. I can hear the pounding of basketballs from within, and the mere sound of dribbling is enough to make my heart beat faster, to make my stomach tingle with adrenaline.

“God, I hate this class,” Nell spits, a sizable ball of mucus splattering in the grass. “Mr. Henry, he’s such a weirdo. Such a dork.”

“Agreed.” I can see and hear him. I envision the pale sheen of his scalp, hair shaved all the way down to stubble so you could see every bump and crease, even though he wasn’t bald. I can hear his British accent, softened by three decades of living in America but still present. The same blue shirt and khaki pants, worn everyday without fail. I can imagine just looking into his closet and seeing nothing but stacks upon stacks of khaki pants, as if his home was a warehouse for Dockers.

“In my class today, he just started randomly massaging Thomas’ shoulders out of nowhere. Like, Thomas was talking about how much of a cunt Estella was, and he patted him on the shoulders, I guess to show agreement. Then he patted him again and the pats turned into squeezes and it was, like, awkward. Tommy was just sitting there with the funniest look on his face!” Nell giggles.

“I know, he’s so... odd!” I laugh. “The way he stares at people. Like, he won’t break eye contact with you no matter what. One time I was in the elevator, and the doors were about to close when he came up to them. He didn’t even get in the doors, he just looked at me through them as they closed! Didn’t push a button.”

“I think he’s just nearsighted as fuck and won’t admit it. Like he thinks glasses aren’t cool or some shit like that. That’s why he stares at everything, because he can’t see.”

“He’s actually not *that* bad, I think. He’s nice enough in his office conferences. Still gave me a C on the *Moby-Dick* paper, but he was pretty nice about it.”

“You got a C? That was the easiest paper this semester. Come, let’s hurry up and start writing, because I don’t want you to get another one. Nell quickens the pace, her long legs swinging, and I follow behind.

It’s late at night, the computer screen’s glow illuminating my face. The shit Folger’s coffee I brewed to try to keep myself going has gone cold, sitting there meekly on my desk. Some Imagine Dragons blares in the background from my stereo, sugary polished pop to try and get me in the zone, but I can’t focus, my mind drifting to the lyrics. Of course, my study session with Nell was completely unproductive. She means well, and she tries her best to help me, but our attempts to work usually quickly degenerate into TMZ-esque gossip about our classmates. A quick Google search could end my torture. Find an essay online, copy a bit of it, find another essay and paste that in too. Change up the words a little, make it so the language sounds like yours. I mean, it’s not like I can come up with any original ideas at this time. Everything that could be said about *Great Expectations* has been said already. But, of course, the guilt creeps up again. I really don’t want to copy and get caught. I guess I’ll do what’s worked for me in the past. Find a juicy quote or two and bullshit about it.

The words on the page are starting to blend into each other, the edges of my vision getting fuzzy. If I don't pick it up now, I'll wake up in the morning passed out in a puddle of my own dried-up drool. I pinch myself on my pale cheek. *Keep going, girl.* My fingers start moving in a blur without any thought or input, the keyboard popping and clacking. I just want to get it over with, so I can slip back into the warm embrace of sleep. I've been sleeping too much nowadays, not working out, ever since I left the basketball team. My stomach getting paler and more bloated. I feel like shit about myself, but I continue to write, to remind myself that it will all work out in the end. It worked out for Pip too. Sort of.

I'm outside Mr. Henry's office, and I can feel a queasiness in my stomach. I always dread these writing conferences. Mostly because my writing isn't that good. But really, I don't like being criticized. I don't like being put under a microscope, but that's exactly what these conferences are designed to do. Whoever invented these obviously delighted in the torture of young students. I wipe the wetness of my palms on my red-and-white checkered skirt. I can hear shuffling from inside the office, but Mr. Henry hasn't emerged yet. I stare nervously at the clock on the plaster wall across from me, watching the secondhand tick away my life.

The door creaks open and Mr. Henry peeks his glistening head out. I can see the sweat gathering on his forehead. He's one of those men who will always be a soggy mess no matter how much antiperspirant they put on. "Come in, Sarah," he tells me in a soft voice, barely above a whisper. I awkwardly duck in through the doorway and take a seat.

Mr. Henry is leaning back in his office chair, his hands crossed on his soft stomach. My paper is printed out in front of him on his desk, which is immaculately clean, an anomaly considering he's a teacher. Henry's taught at Abbey Grove for a decade now, and his office is still nearly bare. There are no family photos pinned to the walls, no birthday cards or notes of thanks

next to his computer. In fact, the more I think about it, the more I realize I know startlingly little about his personal life. And he's been teaching me since I was in middle school. I look at my paper and I see an odd lack of red markings. Did he even read it?

"How are you doing, Mr. Henry?" I offer an olive branch to him, try and kickstart the conversation.

"I'm alright." He speaks softly, trying to keep his lips close together, reveal as little of his mouth as possible. He's definitely self-conscious of his teeth. Crooked and slightly yellow. I guess the stereotypes of Brits having shitty teeth are true. "I've got a bit of a sore throat, but it's been progressively improving." He didn't need to tell me that; I know because of the cloying smell of menthol from the cough drops he's been sucking all morning. I try to avoid eye contact with him, my eyes drifting to the half-eaten box of salad on his desk, with its sad and wilted lettuce.

"That sucks," I tell him. "I've been kinda sick too. I think it's because of the weather. It changes so quick around here, you know. Throws you off."

"Yes, absolutely." He drums his fingers on his thigh, and there's another awkward pause in our conversation. "Anyways, of course you're here because I wanted to discuss your essay with you," he finally says.

"Of course." I meekly blurt out. Here comes the criticism.

"It's brilliant. Bloody brilliant."

"What?"

"I absolutely commend your effort. Sarah, I have to say it is unlike anything you have ever written before. I always knew you were a talented writer, but this time I think you went above and beyond with your effort."

"That's- that's great!" Confusion is starting to settle in. I half-assed this shit, it couldn't have possibly been that good, right?

“You really got into Estella’s head. I think you analyzed the root causes of why she toyed with Pip’s emotions with a very astute intuitiveness. You put a contemporary spin on it too. Very perceptive of you.”

“I’m glad you liked it.”

Mr. Henry’s eyes are drifting away from mine. I can see they’re lingering on my chest, where my tits would be if this goddamn uniform didn’t keep them compressed and hidden. He licks his chapped lips, and some skin flakes from them and settles on his khakis. If anyone needed some Carmex, it’s him.

“Listen, this is beyond A-level work. This is just wonderful stuff. I really think you should enter it in a competition of some sort. There’s an essay competition for young writers sponsored by Scholastic Press. I think it would be a travesty if you didn’t submit to that competition.”

“Honestly, I didn’t even think the essay was that good. I didn’t know you would like it so much.”

“I love it.” Mr. Henry reaches out a small hand and squeezes my shoulder for just a millisecond longer than he needs to, pressing his thumb against my collarbone. The cough drop stink is clogging my nostrils and I want to retreat into my shell like a turtle. “Now get lost and turn that essay in. I’ll sign off on the recommendation form. You still have two weeks to get it in.”

“I’ll do that for sure. Thanks, Mr. Henry.” I hoist myself off the stiff chair, scoop up my backpack, and walk down the hallway, the fluorescent lights beating down on me. After a few steps, I turn around to see if he’s still looking at me, and there he is, lounging in his chair, a goofy grin spread across his face. He raises a hand in acknowledgement and I raise one back awkwardly.

I’m laying on my stomach in bed, mindlessly scrolling on my computer, looking at the files on my desktop and everything I’ve ever written. I can hear the television blaring downstairs, the

sounds of a New Orleans Saints game drifting through the house. Dad's probably drunk off his ass, shaking his fist at the screen, under the delusion that his yelling and screaming is going to make the team play any better. Mom's probably retreated to the bedroom, reading a Jodi Picoult novel, trying to escape the stink of beer and car commercials for a few blissful minutes. Dreading the disappointing, sweat-soaked sex that will inevitably follow Drew Brees and company getting their asses whipped on national television. And I don't even know what my brother is doing either. Probably jerking off or playing video games. I don't even talk to him anymore, not since the treatments began. He gets prickly if anyone says anything to him nowadays. Shit, I don't blame him. I would be fucking pissed too if I was in his shoes. God dealt him one shitty hand.

I'm looking at all the stuff I've ever written. All the essays for English class, the articles I wrote the one year I worked for the student paper, all the awkward attempts at poems about guys I've crushed on. Anything to keep my mind off basketball, to stop myself from opening up YouTube highlights and feeling guilty about everything. Nell works for our student newspaper in the digital media division and she made a highlight tape for me, high definition clips of me making gangly girls look like bumbling fools on the basketball court. Fifty thousand views. Not bad considering no one really gives a fuck about women's basketball.

I still can't believe that Mr. Henry liked my essay. Admittedly, my grades in his class haven't been the best, but that's because I don't talk, don't participate in class discussion. I'll leave all the chit-chat to the teacher's pets. You know, he's always found something in my writing, though. He may be a sweaty man with a lack of hygiene and no concept of personal space, but he's a good writer. He used to write op-eds for the *New York Times* and shit like that. Published a few books too that were decently well-received. I remember our headmaster nearly creaming his pants with excitement at assembly when he announced that Xavier Henry was coming to teach at All

Saints. They had to pull out the red carpet for him too. 300 thousand dollars a year and an honorary teaching position to get him to come to Louisiana, the armpit of America.

If he likes my writing, he obviously sees something in me. Or, maybe, he just likes me. I can't tell. But no one's ever really praised my writing before he came along. And it feels good.

I've got to shut the computer off now. Get some rest, because I have an AP calculus test tomorrow. I read that too much exposure to computer screens at night can really screw with your Circadian rhythms and knock you off balance. And I need to pass this calculus test if I want to go to college. I don't know what the hell I'm going to do if I don't get it in. Go to trade school and fix motorcycles for the rest of my life? And I sure as hell ain't going to community college. I'm too smart for all the drug addicts and single moms who go there. Maybe this essay can be my golden ticket. Maybe writing can be for me what basketball used to be. We'll see.

Nell and I are leaning against the side of the arts building, staring at the outdoor basketball court. It's so hot that cracks have emerged in the blacktop, spiderwebbing through the concrete. I'm feeling a twinge of longing looking at the metal basketball rim, the nets long since stripped away by some prankster, but I try to swallow it down.

Nell's puffing eagerly on a cigarette, the tip glowing between the chipped nail polish at the tip of her long, slender fingers. I've always liked the smell of cigarette smoke. Gasoline, too. There's something oddly appealing about those two things. Nell's my only real friend, by the way. You would think I would have made friends playing for the basketball team, but none of those girls really liked me. I think they were a bit jealous of me. They hated that I scored the most points. They hated that I stole the spotlight from them. I'm honestly kind of glad I don't have to deal with their passive-aggressive bullshit anymore.

"Want to take a drag?" Nell extends the cigarette to me.

“I’m good, Nell. You know I don’t smoke.”

“You don’t play basketball anymore. You don’t have to do cardio anymore, so a little smoke ain’t gonna hurt ya.”

“Nah, I’m fine.”

Nell looks at me with casual disappointment before resuming puffing on her cig. We sit in silence for a while, appreciating the chattering of the songbirds, glad it’s after school so there’s no more annoying little pricks barely out of diapers running around. It’s a beautiful, sunny day.

“How’d your conference with Henry the Great go?” Nell asks, raising a freshly threaded eyebrow at me.

“It actually went really well. Like, really, really well. I think he honestly liked what I wrote a lot! He told me to submit it to a competition.”

“You told me you half-assed it, and he still liked it? Damn, sweetheart.” Nell flicks some ashes to the ground.

“Yeah, he did like it. Of course, he tried to get a little touchy-feely as well, so I don’t know if he *really* likes it or if he’s just blowing smoke up my ass.”

Nell tries to suppress a chuckle. “God, Sarah, you know Mr. Henry. He only does that touching thing with people he genuinely likes. You and Thomas, because you both write well, even though you don’t know it. Kiara, she’s like the hottest girl in our grade, and he treats her like a leper ‘cause her writing is absolute shit.”

I laugh and take my eyes off Nell for a second, looking at the mottled patterns of sun filtering through the oak trees. Nell keeps puffing away at her Camel. It’s funny how old-fashioned Nell is. All the kids nowadays are getting their nicotine fix through Juuls, but Nell insists on smoking her cigarettes illicitly behind the English and History building. When not at school she dresses all old too; stockings and knee-length skirts and whatnot. She’s got quite a strange fashion

sense, certainly more interesting than the ass-exposing shorts that are all the rage right now. Might as well go naked if you're going to wear that.

Nell looks at me again. "God, Mr. Henry, he's such a tough nut to crack. Like, he's so weird, you know. Even considering the whole touching his students up thing."

"I don't know. He seems nice enough to me, A little bit odd, but nice."

"He never eats lunch with the rest of the teachers in the cafeteria. He always takes his crap to-go in one of those Styrofoam boxes. Eats it in his office."

"That's not that weird. Hell, I hate eating with other people too. Makes me feel like a goddamn zoo animal."

"He drives a Ferrari. What high school teacher drives a sports car?" Nell quizzes me.

"A teacher that gets paid a dump truck full of money to teach."

"And he's doesn't have any family members, as far as I know. No wife, no kids. And he never talks about his personal life. I've tried to get him to open up with my *seductive* charms." Nell tries swishing her hair around in a hot manner. "Nothing."

"Maybe that's just his personal philosophy."

"Sure." Nell flicks the cigarette into the overgrown grass. "Come, lets walk to Mickey D's. That Indian food they served today at lunch was super gross. I need a quarter pounder to get the taste out my mouth." Without even looking at me for approval, Nell darts off in the direction of that fine dining establishment, that glowing symbol of America. I tag along behind her, ever the loyal dog on a leash.

Nell walks fast, and I've got to quicken my pace to keep up with her. My breath is heavy in the pounding humidity and I'm starting to regret not staying in shape after leaving the basketball team.

“I’m sure you’ve heard the rumors, right?” Nell turns to me with this expectant look in her light brown eyes.

“Rumors?”

“About Henry?”

“I don’t really believe in rumors.”

“You know he used to teach at Thornwell Academy, right? Up in New Hampshire. And he left abruptly to go hike the Appalachian Trail or some shit like that.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I heard he was...”

“Heard what?” I can hear the quivering excitement in Nell’s voice. Nothing in this world gives her more pleasure than dissecting the juicy details of people’s personal lives.

“Well, I heard he was... uh, he was involved with some of the boys there. Like, he was doing things with them. That’s why they made him leave.”

“Nell! What the fuck are you talking about?”

“No, really though! My parents were talking about it. They have connections over there. Heard it through the grapevine.”

“Bullshit. They would never let him teach at Abbey Grove if that was true.”

“Sarah, you know this school is a dump. Headmaster Carter would let any famous person teach here if it boosted our profile. He would let Roman Polanski teach the freshmen film if he could.” Nell spreads her lips and loudly spits a yellowish ball of mucus that narrowly avoids hitting my Converse shoes. “And you think a school of Thornwell’s caliber wants to smear shit across their name with a scandal?. Of course they kept it hush-hush.”

“I don’t believe all this crap about Mr. Henry. He’s a bit atypical but that’s it. Anyways, can we please talk about something a bit lighter?” I look at Nell with puppy-dog eyes, trying to change

the subject. “Last night’s *Walking Dead* episode was pretty cool, right? I can’t believe they killed off Glenn!”

“Smooth change of conversation.” Nell laughs and speeds up, and I follow suit, my stomach gently rumbling like a scooter’s motor, salivating at the thought of a McRib or a Shamrock Shake.

I’m seated across the table from my brother, a greasy basket of half-eaten fried chicken in front of him. It’s his sixteenth birthday today, so I took him to Dave and Buster’s, doing my part as the dutiful older sister, to liven him up a bit, celebrate a little. When we were young, we used to go to this place obsessively all the time. My brother was good at so many games here. There was that one Terminator game with laser guns. Ronnie was an unstoppable sniper at that. He was real good too at that one game where you roll the ball up a ramp, try to aim at different holes for points. I don’t know what it’s called, but he would always embarrass me at that one. But I would get back at him with the basketball game, of course.

It’s been a while since we’ve been to this place, but it feels like we were here just a week ago. Everything is so familiar. The flat-screen TVs obnoxiously plastered on every inch of the wall, showing golf or roided-up dudes bashing each other’s brains into mush. The throbbing bass from the latest dance song every damn radio station was playing. The laughter of little children as they cash in their tickets, eyes lit up as they salivate over the prizes on the wall. Nostalgia, it’s better than drugs. Not that I’ve tried any.

“You done eating those strips?” I look at my brother, swirling his slim finger around in the grease congealed at the bottom of the basket. “Can I try one?”

“I ain’t done with them yet.” Ronnie retorts in his pronounced Southern drawl. It’s funny how we speak, because I don’t have a trace of a Cajun accent, but Ronnie sounds like pure redneck through and through. It’s probably all those damn country records he listened to growing up. He tells me he isn’t done with his food, but I can tell by the look plastered on his face, the reluctance when he swallows, that he’s done eating. But he’ll continue to stuff himself to pretend like he’s still normal. The drugs, man, they really fuck with your appetite.

“We still got plenty of credits left on the card. Hurry up so we can use them. I wanna beat your ass one more time.”

“I’m good.”

I look at all the tickets we won stuffed into a cup, placed on the cracked faux leather seat next to me. “We should go and cash these tickets out, then.”

“Save them for later. I’m trying to save up to get the Xbox.”

“You already got a PlayStation. The hell you want an Xbox for?”

“I don’t know. I just want it. I could play Halo on it.”

“Alright, hey. You sure you don’t want to come play the jet ski game with me? That’s the one game you don’t suck at.” I try and crack a smile, brighten up his dour mood a bit. I know he’s not enjoying this as much as he used to. He would rather be hanging out with his football buddies, drinking Lone Star without telling his parents. Maybe getting lucky with one of the tiny little cheerleaders. But none of the kids he played football with in middle school talk to him anymore. Now all those kids are taking horse pills that swell their muscles and shrink their balls so they can go out and give each other concussions. They don’t care about skinny little Ron Jr. anymore, even though he threw more touchdown passes than any middle schooler in Louisiana state history. Hell, he was a four-star recruit until the meds made him a shell of himself. Now he’s just hanging out with his lame big sister.

Silence descends over Ronnie. He's not talking to me now, and instead watching the X Games or some shit like that, hoping one of the cyclists wipes out. The one thing I like about him, even though he doesn't talk to me anymore, is that he isn't glued to his cellphone like all the dumbass narcissistic teenagers nowadays. Though I suppose it's because he doesn't have many friends to distract him.

"I'm gonna go take a piss really quick." I pat him on the shoulder and shuffle out of the dining area, past an obese lady talking loudly so everyone can hear what she has to say and through a throng of little kids taking turns dipping their fries into each other's sodas. The arcade machines are packed together as tightly as possible, their twinkling lights and beeping noises a siren song calling to passersby. The bathroom is toward the very end of the building. And that's when I see him. Mr. Henry.

I duck behind a row of pinball machines, hoping not to be spotted by him, trying to avoid the painfully awkward small talk that would ensue if we saw each other. After a few seconds, I discreetly glance around the corner, pretending like I'm fixated on the Indiana Jones pinball machine in front of me. Mr. Henry's leaning against of those claw machines filled to the brim with soccer balls and stuffed animals. He's got a giant thing of cotton candy in one hand and a stuffed animal in the other, a Pokémon of some sort, I think. He's changed out of his trademark khakis, and instead he's wearing a baggy Adidas tracksuit. Looking like a Polish skinhead. Or a lost white member of Run-DMC. He's just gloriously chewing on his cotton candy, a dog munching on a treat. I can see the unbridled joy emanating from him.

Nell would have a field day with this. I can't resist taking a photo of him with my cellphone. I angle the device so it looks like I'm just texting, surreptitiously snapping a pic like a stalker from the movies. Then I send it to Nell through Snapchat. A black banner streaking across the photo reading **OMG I JUST SAW MR HENRY AT DAVE AND BUSTERS!**

I go into the women's bathroom, navigating the little girls running around like headless chickens, trying not to slip on the paper towels lazily scattered everywhere. I take a seat in the stall, tuning out the chatter around me, and start scrolling through my phone mindlessly. Texts from Nell keep popping up.

"Is he with a special someone?"

"Nope. By himself. Eating candy and looking cool."

"Tell me what game he was playing."

"He was playing that game where you have to hit the button just as a specific lightbulb turns on. You know, the one where the light goes around and around in a circle."

"OK, go outside and tell me what he is doing now. Spill the tea."

"Sure, but I've got to check on my brother first."

I go back to the restaurant area to see how Ronnie is doing. He's slumped over in his seat like a hunchback, now picking at an obscenely messy banana split that's replaced the fried chicken.

"Can I taste a bit?"

"Sure." Ronnie extends a lanky hand and gives me a plastic spoon. His mood seems to have improved a bit. I scoop some of the dessert into my mouth and relish it, savoring the peanut butter and vanilla ice cream. "You took your sweet time pissing," he grins slyly.

"You know how long us girls take in the bathroom!" I laugh as my phone buzzes. Another message from Nell. "Go James Bond and spy on Henry for me," she writes. "I wanna know what teachers do in their spare time."

"I'm going to play some games for a few more minutes." I tell Ronnie. "Finish up your sundae, and then I'll drop us back home. We can play a few Call of Duty matches there." I see Ronnie smile a little bit in excitement. I fuckin' hate that game, especially with all the ten-year-old racists and homophobes that love to play it, but it's my brother's birthday and I'll do whatever to

make him happy. But first, I want to stalk my teacher a little bit more. In the nicest way that you can stalk someone.

He's playing the *Fast and Furious* bike game right now, the one where you sit on a plastic little replica of a motorcycle and fantasize that you're revving the engine. His ass is poked out, sizable I'm sure due to a disproportionate amount of junk and frozen meals in his diet. The meals he eats in his McMansion by himself because no one is around. I've driven by his house once because Nell looked up his address on Whitepages and wanted to check it out. Beautiful place, but I'm not sure why he needs that much space.

I can see pure joy in his eyes, excitement as he grips the rubber handles, leaning his body from side to side to steer his character in the video game. He's racing some little boy who is maybe a fifth of his size, snot running from his nose and down his upper lip, so small that he can barely see the screen and has to crane his head upwards, like a worshipper of the stars. Except the light his stars cast is a blindingly bright LED screen made in Japan. Mr. Henry and the kid are entangled in a race through some dense jungle foliage, a replica of what I assume is ancient Mexico or Central America complete with pyramids, dancing tribal people, and erupting volcanoes in the background. Mr. Henry is in the lead, and I can see the kid's got competitive spirit, his anger at being behind getting to him a little bit so his face turns red. Mr. Henry notices, and as they approach the checkered finish line, he eases his grip on the throttle, slows up a little bit to let the kid pass him. The pleasure on the kid's face is palpable as "1st place" glows on his screen in ostentatious gold letters, and Mr. Henry turns to him, high fives him with a resounding smack. I, a paparazzo of Metairie, Louisiana, take another photo and text it to Nell. She replies with a cartoon face crying with laughter, amused by the fact that a fully-grown man is playing arcade games with the enthusiasm of a little child. We'll have a lovely conversation at the lunch table tomorrow.

“Let’s go. I gotta get some math homework done.” I gently tap Ronnie on the shoulder, and we’re out the door, our bodies cutting through the thick air, me hoping I don’t start sweating too much before I get to the car.

I’m eating lunch with Nell in my usual spot at one extreme end of the cavernous lunchroom, as far away from the gaudy stained-glass cross on the other side that hovers over everyone. It’s just five of us in a cluster: Nell and I, and the Flowers twins with their studded braces and blonde hair extensions. Jake is eating with us too, a tall skinny kid whose interests are a bit too niche for him to ever fit in with the popular kids. We’re not outcasts, but we’re not cool either. We’re just floating along in the awkward no-mans-land of the high school hierarchy where no one really gives a shit about you, for good or bad. Jake’s got three cartons of whole milk on his tray even though he’s supposedly lactose intolerant. He claims he needs all that milk to build muscle, but it hasn’t worked yet. And of course Nell’s on her phone. She’s always glued to it.

“That photo you sent me of Mr. Henry was fucking hilarious!” Nell laughs out of the blue. “I Snapchatted it to all my friends.”

I can feel my mood souring a little bit, my mouth puckering like I bit into a lime.

“Nell, come on. That was, like, supposed to be between us,” I sigh.

“Come on, I had to show it to some people. I had to show them that Mr. Henry can have a little fun too. That he likes to play with kids. I showed it to Anna, and she was laughing her ass off on FaceTime.” Anna being the spoiled British exchange student who stayed with Nell last semester before going back to London. “I learned a new word from talking to her because of that.”

“A new word?” I raise an eyebrow.

“Yep. Anna called him a ‘nonce.’ It’s such a fun word to say. ‘Nonce.’”

“Nonce? What does that mean?”

“It’s like British slang for a dude who’s into kids.”

“Into kids?”

“I mean into kids the way a dude who’s attracted to kids is into kids.” Nell flails her arms in exasperation.

“Jesus, Nell.” Blood flushing my face, I get up swiftly, leaving a half-eaten lunch tray on the table. Nell starts tagging behind me as I pace through the enormous glass doors that make up the entrance to the cafeteria.

“It’s just a bit of a joke, that’s all!” Nell says, wavering between laughing at me and trying to soothe me. “We’re just poking fun at him, that’s all.”

“Mr. Henry’s not like that. He’s a nice guy, just a bit awkward.”

“Good God, Nell. Don’t act so offended. I say way more not-PC shit all the time and you never get mad.”

“Yeah, but this is different.” I say, as I quicken my pace.

“You’ve heard the rumors about Mr. Henry. About what he did at his last school. Think about it. I mean, we’re joking about it, but there’s a good chance this shit is true anyway.”

“I really don’t want to talk about it right now. I’ve got to go polish up my essay for the Scholastic competition. It’s due in a couple days,” I say, as I widen the gap between me and Nell.

“You like him, don’t you?” A Cheshire Cat grin materializes on Nell’s face. “Is it because he liked your writing? Is it because somebody thought you were smart for once?”

Without even looking at Nell, I gently extend a middle finger. I can’t stay mad at her for long, but right now I just need to be away from her gangly ass for a little bit. God, Nell sometimes, she just demonstrates this frustrating lack of social awareness. I love her to death but talking to her feels like willfully bashing your head into a brick wall sometimes. I’ve never been one for talking

shit and gossiping behind people's backs, it's just not in my blood. I can listen to it and put up with it, but I can't partake in it. It's just the way I'm wired, the way God made me, I suppose.

In Catholic schools, rumors spread quickly, like warm butter on toast. I think it's the repression that being a Catholic comes with. You've got to get your rocks off somehow. And fucking Snapchat, man, it only makes the process quicker. It's only a day before the wall of graffiti in the women's bathroom gets a new addition: a cartoon version of Mr. Henry, eyes bugging out like a Looney Tunes cartoon, staring at a kid. I hear the chatter in the commons when the teachers aren't around, and I know some of it is about Mr. Henry, and I can't help but feel a twinge of guilt. Just like the kids here make fun of Mr. Srinivasan for his accent by exaggerating their syllables, or Ms. Claire for being a pale and blubbery feminist. So Mr. Henry gets added to the pantheon of teachers with their defining characteristics. Xavier goes on teaching his class, that same familiar sheen of sweat coating his forehead as he drones on about Jane Austen and Emily Dickinson. The kids don't dare say anything to his face, but you know that in their heads they're laughing at him. Trying to imagine him thinking about little children, about young boys. Laughing at this man who, I suppose, makes them feel normal. Maybe a year ago, back when I was still playing basketball, when I had a little bit of popularity, I would have laughed too. But now I'm finding it harder and harder to find this juvenile shit funny. I guess I'm growing old.

Days blend into nights and I'm back in the office of the man who is no longer Mr. Henry. I'm glad our writing conference is after school this time, when the athletes are practicing in the oppressive Louisiana heat and the rich kids have gone back to their comfortable cul-de-sacs. Because if one of the more popular kids were to see me come out of his office, Lord knows what they would say about me.

I can tell Mr. Henry hasn't slept in a while from the bags under his eyes. He's also sweating even more than normal as he eyes my *Great Expectations* treatise for mistakes, yellow pit stains spreading like a supernova explosion. I wonder if he knows what the kids have been saying about him. He must know. Conversations must have echoed through the cavernous hallways of this school and gotten to his ears. I shudder to think how bad the drawings and cartoons in the men's bathroom must be.

"Excellent. This is lovely, Sarah." It almost seems like he's forcing out the words, like every syllable is taking conscious effort for him. I want to burrow into his head. I almost want to ask him about his thoughts, to comfort him and say he's not as bad as everyone thinks he is. But what if he doesn't know? What if he's just going through life oblivious to the rumors? Then I can't say anything, then it would be better for him to live in blissful ignorance.

"This writing is bloody brilliant. I can see you've really taken the time to, *fashion*, each sentence carefully. Your points are lucid and concise. I think it would honestly be a travesty if you didn't win."

"Thank you, Mr. Henry." I give him the faintest and meekest of smiles.

"You're going to go far, kid. Like the *Offspring* song says. You guys like the *Offspring*, right? Teenagers your age."

"Yeah, of course. They're pretty popular." The *Offspring* haven't been relevant in like a decade, and I've always disliked their half-baked pop punk shit, but I humor Mr. Henry and his deficient knowledge of popular music.

"Well, the deadline is tomorrow by 5." Mr. Henry says. "Make sure you get it in on time. Glance over it one more time tonight. You did good, Sarah." I look at his bluish green eyes, shimmering back at me. The fresh stubble on his chin. He hasn't shaved in a while, hasn't been taking care of himself. The skin around his eyes is red and puffy. Has he been crying? Or is it just

allergies? I raise my hand to say bye to him and slink out through the office doors as inconspicuously as possible.

So, two weeks later, I got a silver medal. In the writing competition, that is. I wish it would have been a basketball medal, but, fuck it, you take what you can get. It came in the mail, all wrapped up in Styrofoam packaging. Glistening fake silver, with a little plaque as well to commemorate the occasion. I saw my dad smile when the package came in the mail. The first time in a while he was proud of me. It was enough for him to peel his ass off the couch and come congratulate me.

But it doesn't mean shit in the grand scheme of things. It's just a little award, after all. I've been applying to college, and the letters are pouring in now. They're not the fat packages brimming with goodies and smiling, diverse kids on welcome brochures. They're the skinny, anorexic letters, the ones where you feel it in your hands and immediately know what it's going to say. I'm tempted to not open them and just let them lie there, preserving the hope indefinitely. The hope that would evaporate the moment I tore that seal off.

Dear Sarah,

Thank you for your application to the University of Miami. Although your candidacy was very strong, we regret to inform you that we cannot consider you for admission at this time due to the strength of our incoming class. We wish you the best with your academic endeavors.

That's it. Three sentences is all they could manage. And it's not like Miami is fuckin' Harvard or Stanford either. Fuck me, it looks like I'm really going to have to go to Louisiana State. Hang out with all the beer-swilling frat boys driving jacked-up pickup trucks with Confederate flag decals on the side. I guess that's what I deserve for being born in Louisiana.

Mr. Henry resigned two days ago. One day he was drawing frantically on the chalkboard as usual, and the next he seemingly disappeared into thin air, replaced by a frumpy lady with librarian glasses and curly hair, no doubt plucked at a moment's notice from one of the many dogshit public schools that make up Louisiana's wonderful school system. She walked in and started throwing her weight around like she'd been here all year. A few days later, during our Friday morning assembly, Father Pritchard addressed the issue in hushed tones after the unenthusiastically mumbled prayers. Running his hands through his thinning hair nervously. Said there had been a *situation* and Mr. Henry had turned in his resignation as a result. Encouraged us all to be careful about what we say online. And then everything was quickly forgotten, Father Pritchard replaced on stage by swollen football players performing a painfully unfunny skit to try and convince the student body to turn out for tonight's game against Corpus Christi. Sorry John, but no one wants to spend their Friday night watching y'all get punched in the mouth over and over again by a team much better than you.

Assembly is mercifully declared over, and I shuffle toward the cafeteria at 11 am, the first of three consecutive lunch periods. I don't know whose brilliant idea it was to make people eat lunch at 11 in the morning. Anybody who says they are hungry that early after having eaten breakfast two hours earlier is lying. I catch a glimpse of Nell. She halfheartedly waves at me before shuffling away. I want to say something to her, but the words are stuck in my throat like a cancerous mass.

I never talked in person to Mr. Henry again, after that last meeting in his office. He sent me an email congratulating me, telling me how proud he was of the way my writing had developed and evolved. I gave him a one-sentence reply in return and then buried it in the back of my mind. In class, I was sitting at the back and didn't speak up or participate, just like usual. He would make brief eye contact with me and unspoken thoughts would run through our heads. And then he was gone.

I guess that's how time works. It goes on and on, things are built and then crumble. Everything that shines eventually turns to rust. People are here one day and go away the next. I can't think about all that right now. Honestly, school and college are the last things on my mind. I see my brother, his body starting to atrophy. I see how much it pains him to move his joints, how even getting out of bed is an obstacle to be climbed over. I see my potbellied dad, collapsed in his recliner, watching the same inane sports talk shows over again, drinking the same horse piss beer until the room smells metallic. How much could college even change at this point?

I flip my laptop open, resigning myself to another evening of mindlessly scrolling through Instagram and watching *The Office* or *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*. I turn the MacBook on and a blank page greets me, a remnant of the essay I was writing. I can feel something within me, a sort of mild electricity buzzing in my fingertips. The screen glows warmly and invitingly. I can faintly hear music from Ronnie's room, the low thump of the expletive-studded hip-hop that's his bread and butter. It mixes with the chirping and buzzing of the katydids outside, as they sing out in response to the warmth. It's nice background noise, the familiar sound of my youth, a nice reprieve from all the bullshit swirling in my head. All the thoughts eating at me in my bed as I emerge from my cocoon, as I prepare to sink or swim in the real world. Very pleasant to my ears, soothing like a glass of warm milk.

Jaguar God

I've been cupping this beer for the last hour, desperately trying to finish it off. I always thought beer defined a man, that you weren't anything in this world until you could finish a twelve-pack by yourself in a day. But twenty-four revolutions around the sun and I can't even do two pints without gagging like I've got fingers shoved down my throat. I've got to try and finish this one though. For my own peace of mind. My wifebeater's slick, clinging to me like a second skin, and each swallow's harder and harder, but I swish the warm bubbles around my mouth and persevere. Keep my eyes focused on the TV. Watch the backup dancers twist and gyrate. God, I wish I could drink as effortlessly as these girls can move.

Let me tell you, brother, I always thought Texas was hot, but, god damn it, down here it's so much worse. Because it's not just the heat. It's the mutts groveling at my feet when I'm just trying to have a drink. It's the rain seducing you with the promise of cool and evaporating ten seconds later, making the air even stickier than before. It's the same damn reggaeton song blasting from tinny speakers and drilling a hole in my ear. There's something different about the heat down here. Or maybe there's something different about me now.

A soft "hey" to my right and Jonathan slides onto the stool next to me.

"Where were you at? Thought you ran off into the jungle?" he asks me with a childish grin, front teeth protruding.

"Nah, I was just trying to eat."

"Last night at *El Sol* was wild, man. There was this one *mamacita* on the dance floor who started grinding on me with no warning. Just eye contact and *boom*. You should have come."

"You know I can't dance. I would just sit at the bar and look all mopey."

"Gonna finish that beer?" Jonathan answered his own question and scooped up the musty glass with one oversized hand. I had always marveled at the size of this hands. No human being

that skinny should have palms that massive. He would make a great football player if he was a hundred pounds heavier. American football, I mean. Not that stupid soccer shit that any three-year-old can play.

We sat in silence for a while, me stabbing at plantains with a fork of questionable cleanliness, Jonathan hypnotized by the glow of the dinky Sony TV that looked like an artifact from the 80s, as the song transitioned from reggaeton to the stomping beats of some faceless Eurotrash pop group. After a while Jonathan tugged on my red and angry sunburnt arm.

“OK, screw the club, then. There’s a cool person I want you to meet, man. *En la mañana*,” he says in the most nauseatingly gringo Spanish accent possible. “I was just lounging at the docks and he came up to me, and... We just talked. For like two hours.”

“Is he another drug dealer who’s gonna sell you adulterated shit?”

“Nah, man. He’s a real *guatemalteco*. Grew up with the tribes deep in the jungle. He’s looking for gringos like us to take on a journey.”

“And does this journey of his involve controlled substances?”

“Man, I know you’re tired of sleeping away the days at the hostel and drinking away the nights. I just want you to trust my intuition for once. My people skills.”

“Alright, let me finish watching this music video, then I’ll mull it over.”

“I’ll see you at the hostel, my man. I’ll be taking a shower if someone isn’t having sex inside of it,” Jonathan pounded the glass down and pirouetted off the stool with the grace of a figure skater. I listened to his worn hiking boots crunching on the gravel outside the restaurant, tangling with the lapping of waves and the yells of a coconut seller hawking his wares. My ennui steadily rising over the past couple of weeks, I knew it was time to get off my ass and do something.

That evening I stripped down to my no-name brand boxer briefs and tried my best to doze off in the humidity, beads of sweat dotting my chest, blocking out the soft, illicit moans of the Swiss

couple five bunks down. Jonathan was in the bed across from me, the dirt-encrusted bottoms of his feet dangling over the edge. His pack was decorated like a Boy Scout's, full of patches and memorabilia from all the countries he had been to. A cartoon turtle with bright googly eyes from Costa Rica. The thick red and white stripes of the Peruvian flag. Jonathan left his parents in Berlin and his sylvan Bavarian girl to come to the Americas. To discover himself within reveries and booze-soaked nights on the beach. And here he was, hanging out with a scraggly-bearded, greasy-haired guy like me. A college dropout and perpetual embarrassment. The two of us, flaming out spectacularly with the local women, drinking ourselves into a daze, painting the toilets with our vomit in the mornings after. A friendship forged from cheap beer and too many hours watching football in the commons.

Maybe this would be a beautiful opportunity. A chance to venture through the unspoiled reaches of this country. A chance to finally use the DSLR my uncle gifted me, worth more than all my other things combined. A chance to give myself up to the currents and flow wherever the river went. Or maybe it would be another opportunity to complain incessantly.

Screw it, I figured. Let's just go.

Jonathan was gone when I woke up in the morning, his sheets splayed everywhere. I guess he was going to find the stranger who would lead us on a journey of self-discovery and fulfillment. In the meantime, I amble to the kitchen, where the same breakfast as always greeted me in the morning. Milky scrambled eggs with salsa and rice. I sat alone, tucked away in one corner of the cafeteria. The place was an eyesore, decorated with dysfunctional pinball and arcade machines and dotted with obnoxiously colored umbrellas to shield from the sun. I sat in a corner of the patio near some ferns, the shade partially disguising me, because I had grown tired of dealing with my

fellow backpackers, their bright eyes and luminescent smiles, optimism springing eternal. Burning daddy's money with no care. Shit, at least they had money to burn.

A hand clasps my shoulder and I turn to face Jonathan. Standing next to him is a massive man, but not massive in the sense of being fat. Simply bigger than any man had a right to be. The square chiseled jawline, the small dark eyes, all betraying his Indian origins. He extends a hand that swallows mine whole.

"Carlos," he tells me, mouth unzipping open to reveal teeth stained by years of coca leaf chewing.

"I'm Alejandro."

¿*Hablas español*, Alejandro?

"No. That's just my nickname. My Spanish teacher gave it to me."

¿*Este maricón puto piensa que es un gringo?*" Carlos laughs at me.

"Anyways, Jonathan told me about some tour you wanted to take us on."

"No tour. This is not a tour. This is a mission."

"Where did you meet him, Jonathan?"

"At the bar, of course. Where else do you meet people?"

"Come, let's have a drink. I tell you more," Carlos says.

"Can I finish my breakfast at least?"

"*Cinco minutos*," says Jonathan with a sly smile.

"*El está aprendiendo español*," Carlos chuckled. Jonathan stares at me expectantly, like a husband watching his wife give birth for the first time, as I spoon some more eggs and salsa into my mouth.

We are some of the few people in the bar at ten in the morning, the three of us hunched around a rickety wooden table. A flea-ridden dog dozes in the middle of the dance floor. Carlos eyes the cleaning lady as she wipes tables down, his eyes lingering uncomfortably long on her thighs. I'm nursing a Red Bull, a brief reprieve from the liberally flowing alcohol.

"Why you leave Elisabeth?" Carlos prods Jonathan between gulps of lager.

"I didn't leave her. I told her I'd come back to Berlin."

"Sure."

"I didn't lie. I'm just not coming back right now. There's too much fun to be had."

"Can we talk about where we're going?" I intrude.

"Relax, amigo." Carlos reaches over to squeeze my upper arm. "Enjoy."

We make small talk for some more minutes, my attention ebbing and flowing, the bar's warm air wrapping around me like a woolen blanket. The television's showing soccer highlights. Harry Kane just scored a hat trick and the ruddy-faced English fans are jubilant.

"They saw a jaguar in the forest," Jonathan says. "Carlos' people, they saw her resting by the banks of the Rio Dulce. Not even fifteen kilometers from here."

"Bullshit," I say, my attention jerked away from the TV.

"So you think I am a liar?" Carlos smirked.

"Carlos wants our help in finding her," Jonathan says. "The Ladino say that whoever finds her gets showered with blessings. You could use some blessings right now, couldn't you?"

"When did you become religious? Carlos, did you know he played in a hardcore punk band called No God No Master?"

"I was young and dumb back then."

"And now you're old and dumb."

Think, man. If we find her, we will have such a beautiful story to tell. If we can find her and kill her...”

“Kill her? What the hell are you talking about?”

“She has taken two children,” Carlos sighed, his eyes peering off into the distance, not focused on a woman for once. I could feel a warm anger emanate from him, the sinews in his neck wired tightly. “I told Jonathan we must stop her.”

“And why us? Why do you think two stupid gringos, of all people, can help you do this? I can barely boil water.”

Carlos smiles at me, the anger almost instantaneously evaporating. He reaches over and pats my pocket.

“*Dinero*,” he says.

I’m sitting on a rotting tree trunk next to Jonathan, toes digging into sand, stomach still knotted up from the boat ride upriver. Carlos used my money to hire a rusted-out hunk of metal to take us upriver, and the damn thing rattled and shuddered the entire two-hour ride. It took all my willpower to not send a hot stream of yellow goo plummeting into the muddy waters, eyes wired shut, teeth grinding. I really should have brought my Dramamine with me.

“You want some mangrove snapper?” Jonathan hands me a limp-looking piece of fish.

“I’m good, man.”

“I’ve got some granola in my backpack.”

“I’ll eat it in a bit.”

Carlos is splayed out fifty meters from us, hand on his barrel belly, drinking beer. All the equipment we supposedly needed to hunt the jaguar was there. Two weeks of food. A tarpaulin for shelter. A bag full of magical herbs Carlos claimed would attract the beast.

“If you carry the guns I’ll carry the food supplies,” Jonathan tells me, looking wistfully at some egrets on the other shore, a fin dangling out of his mouth.

“We really couldn’t get better guns than those shitty country rifles?”

“What did you want? A rocket launcher?”

“They don’t have any problem getting automatics up in Mexico.”

“We aren’t in Mexico, *amigo*. Besides, you don’t need nothing more than a rifle to kill a jaguar.”

“Stop flirting and come have a drink with me!” Carlos grins, bearing black teeth. “Then put your shoes on. We must get to the trail mouth before dark.”

The veins in my bare arm are protruding, a glowing bluish beacon for the mosquitoes hovering over us like a rain cloud. There’s a dull burning sensation in my feet as I trudge through the mud and rotting leaves, my orange Nikes irreversibly stained. Carlos said it would be only fourteen kilometers until we got to a clearing where we could lay our things down and take a breather, a rest before organizing all our shit and heading deep into the heart of the rainforest to find the beautiful beast. A member of Carlos’ tribe would meet us and give us a blessing before we made the journey onward.

I was promised glory if I made the kill. Carlos even said we would become honorary members of his tribe if we pulled this off. But forget all that, I can tell you the one thing on my mind right now is the beautiful vistas. The emerald green leaves peppered with drops of moisture. The twisting and winding streams we wade through, the cool water a temporary salve for our sore

ankles. Maybe I could get into photography school like I always fantasized about. I was thinking about the Rhode Island School of Design. Or maybe NYU. Certainly somewhere on the East coast where it's cold. Maybe Kendall could see the photos and she might finally feel something. I'm salivating at the thought.

But for now, we hike on, and I'm starting to regret years of chronic lack of exercise. I should have listened to my parents and ran track and field seriously instead of taking shortcuts on those long runs during practice. The thick air is hard to breathe and I suck it in as deeply as I can, tasting the vegetation and the moisture, the flavors of the forest dancing on my tongue.

"Stop." Carlos holds up his hand in front of me. Bending down, his yellowed tank top stretching to accommodate him, he traces his fingers through the dirt in front of us. Jonathan is as tired as I am, face beetroot red, arteries in his neck popping out. And we're only on our second day.

"Tracks. She has been here before." Carlos tells us. I bend down with him and focus my eyes, and I can see the imprints in the mud, three inches in length at most, the outline almost insubstantial.

"I thought jaguars were a bit bigger than that," Jonathan chortles.

"She is a small one," Carlos says. "It is only making sense. She must be small, to avoid detection. To creep through the forest like *un serpiente*."

"Are you messing with me?" says Jonathan. "You sure that's not an ocelot or a puma?"

"There are no claws in the footprint. Only the jaguar walks like that, to maintain silence. Anyways, we should keep moving on, *amigos*. We are near the place where we can rest."

Hoisting himself back up with considerable effort, Carlos gets back up, letting out a sizable grunt. He straps on his backpack and keeps trudging on, and Jonathan rests a lanky forearm on my shoulder.

“I think his heart might get him before the jaguar does.”

Day blends into night like oil paints on a palette and now the three of us are lounging around a fire. Wholly unnecessary given the oppressive humidity, but Jonathan and Carlos seem to be enjoying it. A few cheap beers have been cracked open and those two are enjoying themselves, and I’m sipping from my scuffed water bottle like a loser. A grasshopper of some sort is resting on my muddied sock and I’m letting him relax there, not bothered to swipe him off.

“You both are going to finish all the beers before tomorrow. Then, god forbid, you might have to drink some water.”

“We’re saving one for you, *amigo*.”

“I’ll drink it when we finally kill this damn thing.”

A packet of dried meat gets ripped open, another can of lager pops and clicks. At least Jonathan carried the damn beers in his pack. I got off light hauling the guns. The night goes on and the sleepless insects continue to buzz and chatter. Jonathan is telling Carlos the story of the girl he met on the beach one romantic night in Venezuela who turned out to be a prostitute, a story that’s probably a lot funnier in his head than in anyone else’s. Despite all the water I’m a bit dehydrated and my head’s a little fuzzy, and my lead eyelids begin to shut on this warm night in Guatemala.

Jonathan and I have stripped down to our underwear. Some shaman runs her fingers down my spine, foreign words rolling off her tongue, an entrancing chant. A mixture of mud and herbs cakes my skin, stinging the cracks and cuts. I haven’t had a shower or a chance to moisturize in days. There’s an eczematic patch on the side of my neck, and all I want to do is dig my fingernails into it, scratch and claw until I draw blood. Scrape and scrape until the skin is inflamed.

“Hold still,” Carlos calmly tells me. “Just a little bit longer. Let the words wash over you.”

Jonathan stares at me, his eyes wide with a mixture of what I suppose is curiosity and bewilderment. He has the same paste smeared all over his pale body. The herbs we bought are supposed to be intoxicating, a seductive scent to attract the green-eyed creature. But to me they're more nauseating.

Carlos told us his plan over a breakfast of pork skins brought as a gift by the shaman, a representative from the village. The fine hairs of the pig were still on the skin, but we were four days in and I could feel the acid gurgling within me. Maybe I should have drunk the beer after all. At least it has calories. According to the various mythologies, the herbs and the ancient spells were all supposed to attract this creature to us, where we would finally get the chance to put a bullet in its skull. But, what the hell was I doing? Thousands of miles from home, hunting a dangerous creature. I couldn't possibly tell Jonathan and Carlos now the biggest thing I'd ever shot was a deer. And not even a buck. A small, defenseless doe, her black eyes like marbles. Yesterday had been alright, but after a night of sleeping up against hard knotted roots, my enthusiasm was starting to drain.

“Are you ready?” Carlos asks me.

“Not being ready isn't a choice,” I tell him. At this point, I'm not even sure if *la reina mala*, as the tribes call her, even exists. Shit, at least I've got some pretty pictures to show for it.

Just as rapidly as she came, the shaman slinks off into the foliage with the assured stealth of a feral cat, her thick knotted hair trailing behind her, leaving me completely covered in magic or muck, depending on what you want to believe.

“How did she find us?”

“These people, they know the forest like the warm embrace of a mother. They could find anything here.” Carlos says as he thousand-yard-stares into the distance.

“So why can’t they find the jaguar?” Jonathan chimes in. “Why are we traipsing through the jungle, playing dress-up?” He’s been baking in the sun for an hour, his protective paste already evaporated, leaving the stench behind. Annoyance is painted across his face. His feet are starting to blister, his already slim frame looking a little bit more gaunt. The change in his disposition is sudden, like storm clouds rolling in on a bright day. I’m tired too, but I try to keep those feelings bottled up inside.

“My people, you do not understand how afraid they are. She is like a goddess to them. They do not dare confront her.”

“Why do you have faith in us? Why do you think we can do this?”

“Because you are *gringos*. The supernatural does not scare you. To you, an animal is just an animal.”

“Hey, I’m sorry that we’re acting like pussies.” I finally say something, the words reluctantly slipping from my lips. To us, this was just going to be an adventure. I thought it would be like a... hunting trip, you know? Just a little bit of danger, not too much.”

“*Dios mio*, you gringos think everything is an adventure,” Carlos laughs. “You have feasted and fucked your way through my country. I think you owe us something back for once.”

“*Calmate*,” I place a hand on Carlos’ shoulder. “We appreciate you showing us all this. I want you to know I’m so glad you trust me and Jonathan enough to allow us to help your people, to show us your way of life. *Si*, Jonathan?”

Jonathan looks at me and Carlos for some interminable moments. The air presses down on us like a lead anchor. Jonathan’s blue eyes, looking like pools of cave water, flit back and forth from us to the trees to the mud and back again.

“*Si*.”

If you ever go to Central America, you quickly learn that the one constant presence is the rain. It can come and go like an ephemeral thought, or it can pour relentlessly like the tears of a grieving mother. It touches everything with its infinitely long fingers. Your clothes will never be fully dry, they will always be weighed down by the heaviness of moisture. The air will always feel oppressive, your hair will always be plastered to your head, a helmet of intertwined strands. The rumble of thunder in the distance is a sound as ubiquitous as the passing of cars on a busy street or the chittering of birds in the morning. The rain never leaves you.

My socks are soaked through, and I take them off to get a relief from the sloshing around, revealing nails caked with dirt. The smell of rotting fruit fills the air, nauseating and sweet at the same time. Figs from an ancient tree, with a gnarled trunk looking ready to keel over at any moment. Jonathan's balancing a tumescent fruit in one hand, debating whether to eat it. I'm curled up under an elephantine leaf, trying my best to maintain a modicum of dryness, but it's so goddamn wet I may as well be swimming in the ocean, letting the salt singe all my cuts and bruises. I don't even know where the hell I am now, I probably wouldn't fare much worse navigating the waves.

"Carlos?" I venture meekly. But Carlos isn't listening, he's gazing emptily off somewhere in the brush, the rivulets of rainwater entwining and unwinding on his weathered face.

"Ten days and we haven't seen shit," Jonathan spits, digging his fingernails into the skin of the fig. "At what point are we gonna go back? At what point can we throw our hands up and just say screw it?"

"Four more days, *amigo*. Four more days and I will take you back to the hostel. I will guide you back to where I want to go. But I must preach patience."

Jonathan gets up, sinews in his calves flexing, the fig cast into the foliage with an almost effortless flick of the wrist. Three bounds and he's got a hand wrapped around Carlos' shoulder.

“Look at me. Look me in the eye. Tell me we can do this.”

“Please don’t touch me, *gringo*.” Carlos turns around and brushes the hand away, his beady black eyes glistening in the rain. Putting my scuffed Nalgene down amongst the dirt and rotting leaves, I lift myself up with the effort of an old man. The movement seemingly wakes my empty stomach up, and it roars with the ferocity of a lion. I can feel the acid creeping up.

“Tell me again what you just called me.” Jonathan says.

“*Gringo*.”

“What do you really mean, huh?”

“I mean you a stupid white boy. All the time, it is only about you and no one else. You don’t have the patience, the *cojones* to do this. *Puto gringo*.” Carlos smirks.

Jonathan whips a left hook, his bony knuckles bouncing off Carlos’ high cheekbones like a rubber ball off the blacktop. Stumbling backwards from the force of the punch, Carlos lands ass-first into the mud, a statue tumbling down. The adrenaline’s paralyzing me and I can’t and don’t want to do anything. Jonathan stands over Carlos’ massive frame, fists clenched like a schoolyard bully.

A sweeping kick with his thick boots and Carlos lashes out, a swift strike collapsing bony knees. Jonathan tumbles down unceremoniously, the fury almost instantaneously retreating as he flails in the dirt like a blind baby crawling, a cry of pain slicing the rain. Like a wrestler, Carlos springs to life and clambers on top of Jonathan, pinning his hands behind his back, bowling ball belly pressing him down like a counterweight. I’m just standing there in the downpour, trying to paint over the look on my face, disguise my surprise at the sudden show of strength. Jonathan’s gritting his teeth, thrashing his neck, not accomplishing anything. Carlos weighs twice as much as Jon and that mass is all it takes to keep him restrained.

“Calm down. Calm the fuck down, *amigo!*” Carlos exhorts, holding Jonathan still like a petulant child being restrained from hitting his teacher.

I dash over to Jonathan, crouching down to get in his ear.

“What the hell were you thinking, man! You thought your dumb ass was going to win that fight?”

Jonathan isn’t saying anything, simply shooting daggers at me with his blue eyes, nose pressed into the soil like a pig sniffing for truffles.

“Carlos, just let him go, man.”

Carlos grunts and lifts himself off Jonathan like a spent lover. Jonathan rolls onto his back, the raindrops directly smacking his eyelids, his knee smarting from the kick. I know that’s going to hurt like hell tomorrow. I reach my hand out to him and he waves me off.

“I’m done with this shit, man. I really am.”

“I don’t know what got into you. There was... there was just no need to pull that little stunt.”

Jonathan says nothing. He’s just laying there, nursing his knee, eyes searching for any glimmer of sunlight that might make it through the rain clouds. Carlos is leaned against the giant fig tree, arms crossed, surveying the scene with surprising impartiality.

“Carlos is trying his best. I’m trying my best. Shit, I know this hasn’t been the tropical jaunt we were hoping for but, I swear to God man, we’ll do this.”

“Alright, take his side, then. I’m your only friend in this country, remember.”

“Just suck it up and apologize to him, Jonathan. Bury the damn hatchet.”

“He can apologize to me by getting his ass up and setting up our tents,” Carlos jettisons a ball of spit from his chapped lips. “We’re done hiking for the day. Set up camp and get out of the damn rain.”

Jonathan is passed out under one of our tarps, the brief exertion earlier in the day seemingly draining all his energy. He barely touched most of our admittedly meager rations, so I had a little bit more beef jerky to myself, giving my jaw a workout with all the tearing and chewing. Carlos is perched next to me, dangling a cigarette between thick fingers. No bruise on his face at all, seemingly impervious to punches like a superhero.

“Want a drag?”

“I’ve got asthma, *amigo*.”

“Asthma? *Ay dios*, what are you doing hiking out the jungle then?”

“I’ve got meds for it. An inhaler and all.”

“I see.” Carlos takes another puff and I breathe in the smoke in solidarity with him, letting the tobacco stench mingle in my nostrils with the smell of rotting fruit. The smell reminds me of the halal butcher in Long Island I used to go to as a kid, the almost sweet flesh mixed with the cigarette smell of the chain-smoking Afghani guy who worked there, hair always impeccably slicked back. The aromas of the forest are pleasant and repulsive at the same time, and I bask in them.

“Sleepy, huh?” Carlos quips.

“Don’t worry, I’ll wake myself up. I know it’s my turn to keep watch tonight.”

“Forget it, *amigo*. Let me do it. I don’t sleep much anyway.”

“Damn, you sure about that?”

“No problem.” Carlos tells me.

We sit there for a few more minutes, Carlos puffing his Marlboro, me trying to read some of Neruda’s poetry in the dim light to calm down. A slim volume I’ve read a hundred times, but one that always feels new when I open it.

“I’m sorry about the shit that went down today,” I tell Carlos. “Jonathan, he’s normally such a nice, friendly guy. Sometimes, he just gets frustrated, and well, it usually ends with him getting knocked on his ass.”

“He’s not much of a fighter, is he?”

“You must admit that first punch was pretty good.”

“And my kick was better,” Carlos chuckles, his triceps flexing as he pushes himself up.

“Get some sleep. I’ll keep watch for *la reina*.”

* * *

My sister looks at me with longing, moisture coating her eyes. The robotic voice of the announcer pings through the cavernous hall, rattling through my ears. I already threw up once in the bathrooms before security, and I’m trying to swallow the nervousness down and not do it again. I can taste the acid in my mouth mixed with Folgers.

“Why do you have to go for so long?” she runs her fingers through my hair, the skin of her palms smooth like a baby’s.

“I have to do this. I just want to have fun and find myself. Discover who I really am.”

“You could always teach when you come back.”

“Dad always told me that teachers teach and doers do. I’m not sure he could live with me teaching goddamn elementary school kids.”

“Just be safe, okay?”

“I’ll be safe. And I’m getting into NYU when I come back. No one else is stopping me.”

“I love you so much,” A quick kiss on the forehead and my sister pulls away, pride and apprehension rising in her at the same time. Maybe I’ll have a quick cry once I get through security. But right now I won’t say a word other than goodbye.

* * *

The sunlight dapples across my face, waking me up. I rise off my foam mattress, dusting my hiking pants off and trying to shake the shackles of sleep off. I look across the clearing scattered with fallen figs toward Jonathan and that’s when I see her, a bolt of adrenaline striking my body.

She’s thin, nothing like I imagined. Her spotted coat is faded and dull, her shoulder blades and spine sticking out. Saggy nipples dangle to the ground, her body ravaged by pups. She’s sniffing around the meat we left out lazily by the fire, the ripped packets of almost inedible jerky and cans of Spam trashed and scattered. I take a deep breath, trying to swallow down my fear, and she hears me. She looks right through me with her neon yellow eyes, baring her fangs, spittle dripping from her jaws.

The rifle. Fuck, I need the rifle. My right hand shoots out into my bag, and I’m digging frantically, rummaging through, looking for the first touch of cold steel. She’s pacing toward me now, her paws making no sound on the forest floor. I can see the hunger burning within her. I can see the primeval rage, the need to kill. She’s no goddess, she’s starving like the rest of us and emaciated and needs to eat. Ten meters away and her lips are curled back, tongue swinging, teeth glistening. I can almost feel the fangs burying into my skull, can almost hear the crunch of bones. I can’t let it happen. I wrap my fingers around one gun, the kiss of metal a welcome touch. Fuck, where’s the other gun? She’s coming closer and closer now. How do I cock this shit again? Break the gun open, stick the shells in, snap it back to cock it. Slow and steady. Slow and steady. The

sweat's coating my palms and I'm fumbling with the bullets. I've only got two shots before I have to reload. She's about to pounce and I'm swinging the barrel around, trying to aim, trying to line up a shot.

"You bitch!" Jonathan screams, and the jaguar whips around, distracted by the yell.

Jonathan's egging her on, dragging himself out of his sleeping bag, his bum knee unable to support his weight. She's confused now, her tail twitching erratically, thinking about pouncing on him, torn between the two of us in the center of the clearing.

"Stay down, Jonathan! I got you, man!" A click of the trigger and a shot whistles past her head into the thick bushes behind Jonathan. She screeches and turns her attention back toward me, every tendon in her body twitching. I blast off another shot that misses the mark and barrels into the clearing. She's pacing toward me now, gaining speed, and I've reached for another cartridge, fumbling, trying to load it in time to get off another shot. Jonathan aims a hefty rock at her, a last-ditch attempt to distract her, and it smacks her resoundingly in the shoulder blades, crumpling her onto the ground.

A bang bursts from the rifle and I hit her in the stomach, causing her to stagger. She's slowed down now, howling, confused by the pain, the hot metal ripping into her insides. My hands are quivering and I rise up, smothered in dirt and soaked, trying to steady my aim, looking down the barrel. Her snarling spotted head is in the sights and I squeeze the trigger. There's a squirt of bone and brain matter and I hit her. Hit her right between the eyes. She's trying to look at me but her vision is clouded by blood and her gait is unsteady now, and she crumples into a pile. My hands are shaking, my entire body is a tense wire, and I'm staring at a mountain of flesh, breathing hard, praying to the lord that she doesn't move again.

Jonathan's hands are scarred and tattered from the rock he hurled, and he's lifted himself up, looking at me, happiness and relief intermingled in his eyes. He and I are both quivering from

the adrenaline pumping through our veins, barely able to breathe, vacuuming up the humid tropical hair.

“FUCK! We did it! We did this shit, brother!”

I sprint across the clearing, ignoring the fallen animal, and hug him, his collarbone pressing into my chest, my fingers ruffling through his hair.

“Goddamn, we did it!” I scream as I hold him tightly. Right now I love Jonathan, I love him more than my sister, my family, than any woman I’ve ever loved. Right now, in the pounding tropical heat, we have done what no one else has done. We have slayed Goliath.

“Where’s Carlos at? I gotta say sorry to him!” Jonathan smiles, and a chill slowly descends on me. Carlos had been guarding the camp. Did he leave us? Did *la reina* get him? Jonathan’s eyes are fixated on the slumped corpse of the jaguar god and he’s smiling and tears are streaming down his cheek. I’m staring off into the thick vegetation and silent and trying to swallow and incapable of swallowing, and that’s when I see him.

He’s holding the other rifle in his hands, the missing one. It’s cocked and ready to shoot. But he’s seated. He’s seated and leaning against a rotten tree trunk among the crawling insects and blossoming mushrooms. And I can see the crimson red stain spreading under his shirt. I can see a little red-ringed hole, just right above where his heart would be. His mouth is open and he’s trying to spit out some words, but all he can do is gurgle and moan, the blood streaming from his mouth, making him look like a vampire just finished with his meal. All the color is drained from his face, and mine as well.

“Jonathan, I... Just turn around.”

Jonathan sees what I’m seeing and the pallor immediately descends over him. I stumble towards Carlos like a drunk, and my head is spinning and I’m trying to focus, trying to keep my vision from going blurry. I reach down to Carlos and touch the hole, my fingers staining red, and I

can feel the bullet, still hot from the barrel. I can feel his heart screaming and pounding, the warmth pouring over my hands. Carlos is coughing, trying to say something, forcing the words out with gargantuan effort.

“I was trying... I was trying to protect you.”

Thoughts are rushing through my head like a raging river. I can see the beautiful, expectant face of my sister, her eyes swelling with tears. I can see the mangy hostel with the warm comfort of its beds, the booze and the women, all the nights spent in revelry. I can sense Jonathan right behind me but I can't bear to look around, can't even bear to look in his damn ruddy face. All I can hear now are the cries and chirps of the birds, the jungle surrounding me, the thought of being lost weighing down on me like a lead blanket. The red around Carlos' chest is spreading now, and his breathing has slowed to a standstill, his ribcage no longer heaving with the vigor it once had, no longer booming with the laughter and commanding voice that was so familiar. There's a ringing in my ears, and the sweat is dripping into my eyes and clouding them, mixing with the red of blood and the filthy dirt, and I can't fight gravity anymore. All I can do is crumple down, let my legs turn into jelly, let the earth envelop me, kiss me and love me with its warm embrace.

Carlos used to talk about the river like an entranced boy talking about his first love. The river nourished his people like a mother's blood nourishes a child in the womb. From its waters came all manner of exotic fish, filling the hungry bellies of his people. Its cool kiss quenched thirst in the pounding jungle heat. The river wound its way through the craggy mountains and dense forests, like veins running down a vascular forearm, a highway cutting through the wilderness. The river was our North Star. So we followed the river.

Jonathan and I followed the river, our ankles twisting on the knotted roots along its banks, our soggy shoes falling apart at the seams. Our feet bloody and blistered, our flesh picked apart by

mosquitoes. All we knew, or at least all we hoped for, was that the river would guide us back home. There were landmarks gently beckoning us. A keeled over tree here, a rock jutting through the surface there, evoking a tingling sense of déjà vu, faint memories of a journey taken place just two weeks ago. A time where our lives were full of wonder instead of hunger. We knew we were close, and so we kept struggling on, gritting our teeth through the burning of our legs.

“We should have buried him,” I say.

“We don’t have the energy to do that,” Jonathan replies, eyes fixated on some unknown point in the distance. “We couldn’t... I couldn’t even bear to touch him... the blood...”

“So we just let him rot? Just let him wither away?”

“He would rot anyway if he was buried.”

“His family, his tribe? What if they stumble on him, see him with a hole blown in his goddamn chest?”

“You want to tell them personally, huh? Tell them, and they’ll string you up by the balls and gut you. Go ahead!” Jonathan coughs, a tremor rattling his entire body, sending spittle flying from his mouth. Another cloudburst has left him and me soaked, soiled shirts clinging to sunburnt skin. All I want to do is rip these clothes off like a snake shedding its scales and let boiling hot water run down my body. Singe me and burn me. Cleanse me of all the shit. Thoughts of the hostel and its cheap comforts race through my mind, the cheap beer, the mattresses with all sorts of mysterious stains, the scuffed and scratched plastic furniture. I know we’re close now, because I can see a ramshackle dock further down the bank, a beacon that we’re back in civilization. A canoe broken in half, lazing about in the water, a rusted out monolithic hunk of a boat engine next to it. I look to my left and see Jonathan, wading ankle deep through the river, refusing to look at me. Nausea is creeping up again, and I just want to keel over, puke my guts out, empty myself for some sort of relief. But we’re getting close and I must power on.

The clink of glasses and warm symphony of conversation washes over me. A girl with dark brown eyes and a small gap between her front teeth looks at me expectantly from behind the counter.

“What you want?”

“Give me something hard. Tequila.”

“Okay.” She turns around and starts shuffling glasses and bottles around, preparing my drink. Jonathan is perched next to me, cleaned up, the dirt and grime scrubbed away from his hair and skin, his handsomeness showing once again. I had shaved for the first time in a while, slicing and scraping the hair off my cheeks, and I almost couldn’t recognize my face in the mirror in the bar, smooth and alien. But much gaunter than before.

A clink and two shot glasses are in front of me, rimmed with salt. I lick the salt then swallow the tequila down, feeling the satisfying burn as it slides down my throat. The bartender is looking at me, her eyes piercing through my skin. I’m trying to avoid small talk, looking anywhere else, letting my eyes be hypnotized by the glimmer of neon lights off glass bottles. I lick my lips and swallow once more, letting the burn percolate.

“Hey, you were the *gringos* with Carlos, *si*?” She smiles at me, gap teeth exposed, and I want to curl up into myself, shield myself, make myself as small as possible. Jonathan glances at me.

“You know Carlos?” he chimes in.

“Know him? *Si, por supuesto!* He love to drink. Good man.” She gives a small giggle. “Sometime he drink too much.” She waddles like a penguin trying to imitate Carlos’ drunk stumble.

“Yeah, I... I like him a lot.” I add.

“He said you was going to hunt jaguar. The jaguar was a killer.”

“Yes, the stories are true.”

“But you no find her.”

“No,” I say.

“We found paw prints and droppings,” Jonathan adds. “We tracked her through the jungle for days. But we couldn’t find her. She’s out there though.”

The bartender bites her lip, making a light tutting noise to express her disappointment, like some rare tropical bird.

“He... he was so tired he didn’t want to drink with us,” Jonathan looks at his almost empty beer glass, running one finger gently around the rim.

“Si, maybe is good for him to no drink.” She smiles at us with her broken English.

“Yeah,” I try my best to feign a smile. “We learned so much from him. He’s so connected to the land. I’m glad we went.”

“Carlos like you. You are good peoples if he like you. Here, have another drink.” She slides another shot glass across the countertop’s worn wood, and I take it in my calloused hands and savor the burn.

The dark of the hostel room envelops Jonathan and I as the as insects chirp and squeak merrily outside. We had to rent a two-bed private room because all the cheaper beds in the hostel were sold out, reluctantly handing over the last of our thinning stash of colorful quetzal bills. An unscrewed bottle of sleeping pills lies on my nightstand, designed to induce sleep among the dirt and rocks and tightly twined roots of the forest floor, but now combining with the alcohol to provide a warm embrace, silently rocking me to sleep like a mother comforting her newborn child. I’m too damn lazy to even put the cap back on. I’m looking across at Jonathan, my gaze softening

in the darkness, staring at his narrow, flat feet. He's breathing lightly and gently, the air whistling through his nose, his ribcage rising up and down slowly. Fuck, I never should have listened to him. I should have stayed in the same warm bubble I've lived in my entire life, with the knowledge, the comfort that nothing's going to change. Because there is nothing scarier in this world to me than change. Things can change for the better, sure, but this damn world is so chaotic, so full of moving parts, that it is much more likely things are going to go to shit. Really, all I crave is to be back in my sister's comforting embrace, back home. Back hearing the berating words of my father with their odd reassurance. Even his curses are a reminder that I'm home. That I'm safe. That nothing is going to change, either for better or worse.

I look at Jonathan one more time, at his lanky frame. He dragged me into this. He made me go on this adventure. I was his friend, and he was mine, but that didn't mean I had to listen to him, do everything he said like some damn lapdog. But, then again, he gave me his friendship, he gave me a companion when no one else cared in this shithole country. He gave me a purpose, an excuse to feel like a man for once. And I was the one who pulled the trigger. So, who the hell is to blame? I tried to think, but the pills, they kiss me and touch me with their warmth and drag me into a lovely stupor. My body is sore and everything hurts and I let the pills numb the pain, comfort me like soothing words of reassurance as I fall into sleep.

I pry my eyes open and focus my gaze on the alarm clock's glowing dials. Shit, it's two in the afternoon. I didn't brush my teeth last night, and I can taste my stinking breath, the tequila still clinging to my tongue. My limbs feel like they're weighed down with lead, my neck is stiff, and I crank my head up, every tendon straining, trying to shake off the shackles of slumber.

Jonathan's bed is done up, the pillows fluffed and placed at the head of the bed, the sheets smoothed out. He never bothers to do that. He never makes his bed. His backpack is gone. All his

clothes are gone out of the closet. Every trace he existed in this room is absent except for a letter I can see on his nightstand, hastily scrawled handwriting on a notepad. I can't bear to read it, but I must try. Easing myself off the bed, I strain my body, pick up the letter, run it through my hands. Fuck it, I can't do this. I can't stomach these words. Crumple the damn letter, stuff it in the wastebasket that hasn't been emptied for weeks. Something's burning in me now, frustration and anger, feelings latent my entire life now bubbling to the surface. The eczematic patches on my body are redder and itchier than ever. I want to dig away at them, flay my skin, scratch until I draw blood. A death is something I am now solely responsible for. An innocent man, a hole torn through his big heart. Jonathan's left, slinking away like a thief in the night, and now a death is crushing my conscience. They'll be coming for me soon. They'll be asking questions. There's nothing I can do except run like Jonathan. Run like a coward. Go back to America, go back to my bubble, curl up like a child in the womb. Fold my hands and pray for things to go back to normal, for things to never change again, for life to stagnate. Because stagnation is comfort to me. I don't want to be a different person anymore. All I want to be is the little boy I've always been. All I want now is to live without the fear of anything happening, without the possibility of being hurt or hurting someone. All I want to be is nothing.

Biography

Aarohan Mukherjee Burma was born in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1996, to Sandeep Burma and Bipasha Mukherjee. As a youth, Aarohan bounced around the country, living for stretches in State College, Pennsylvania, Los Alamos, New Mexico, and Berkeley, California, before finally settling in Dallas, Texas. Aarohan attended St. Mark's School of Texas in Dallas for high school, graduating in 2014.

Aarohan then matriculated to the University of Texas at Austin, where he graduated in 2019 with a BA in Plan II Honors, a BSA in neuroscience, and a minor in business. During his time at UT Austin, Aarohan studied abroad for two consecutive summers, first in Costa Rica and then in Switzerland, making some of his best friends abroad.

Aarohan's hobbies include playing basketball, and he is a huge sports fan in general, being an avid supporter of the Dallas Mavericks, Dallas Cowboys, and his collegiate Texas Longhorns teams. He is also into drinking cocktails with friends and traveling, as he has been to over twenty countries and counting. His goal is to see, and more importantly experience, as many countries and beautiful sights as possible before his time is up.



